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THE LADY

# SERENA

*Passion betrayed  
her sacred vow of chastity—  
a flaming romantic novel set in  
Rome under Claudius Caesar*

**JEANNE DUVAL**

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# *THE LADY SERENA*

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by  
Jeanne Duval



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## **DEDICATION**

This book is dedicated to the memory of R.N., whose performance, seen October 16, 1927, first revealed to me the majesty and the glory of ancient Rome.

# 1

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In spite of all her efforts, Serena came in too late for dinner. The chief vestal was a stickler about the proper time to serve dinner and wouldn't have waited for the emperor himself. As this was one of Serena's rare excursions out of the Vestals' House, she did not want to displease the Lady Maxima. But the truth was, it had been a long day and she looked forward more to bed than to food.

Her acid-tongued old body slave, Hagar, brought Serena a light meal of fresh-baked bread soaked in Falernian wine, and followed it with a sweet-scented oil massage. The younger vestals seldom if ever were permitted to wander through the city alone, and they crowded around Serena's room to learn all the details of her day. As a vestal, one of Serena's occasional tasks was to transcribe wills, which meant leaving the pleasant sanctuary of the Vestals' House for the insanity of the outside world. Considering the state of medicine in the Roman Empire, her particular job often threw her in the company of doctors. She had spent a good part of that warm October day with the well-known physician Xenophen of Cos. Her association with any man was of intense interest in the totally feminine world of the six vestals, especially fourteen-year-old Damaris, with her raven dark hair, and eyes whose challenge occasionally troubled the older vestals. Those eyes, innocent as they might be, appeared to search for something, a dangerous quality in vestals, who already had what was presumed to be the perfect life.

"Go away, children," Hagar ordered the three younger vestals, whose fluttering white gowns made them look like agitated puffs of cloud as they huddled in the doorway of Serena's severe little bedroom.

"If it weren't for her looks, they wouldn't always send Serena," one of the girls muttered.

"Serena knows more, and besides, people like her best,"

Damaris protested in an indignant whisper. Damaris had set herself to be Serena's champion in gratitude for the older vestal's help in her early years.

Serena was pleased at the praise but pretended not to hear.

To cover the awkwardness, one of the girls persisted, "Lady Serena, tell us what it is like, following a man all over Rome." The other girls exchanged bright, hopeful glances.

"Unpleasant," Serena insisted breathlessly, as her back was pounded and pummeled by the old slave. "Publius Caecus was suffering from too much roast peacock. A feather had to be forced down his throat to make him disgorge his greedy stomach. . . . You can guess who had to use the feather." Disappointed, the girls made faces at the revolting end of their heroine's sensual adventure. Serena saw their reaction and went on to further diminish an excitement they were not permitted to experience. "Afterward, Publius dictated his will to me. Not that it was necessary. He was feeling fine by that time. Hagar! Stop!" she groaned as the slave gave her one last slap on her slender, beautifully curved hip.

Hagar sniffed. "Bah! People live only at their slaves' convenience these days. The cook was drunk. The service wasn't much better, and the Lady Damaris was gone today when the senior vestal asked for her to grind the meal for our bread. It was her turn." This was one of the many sacred duties of the six vestals. Their food must be prepared as it had been centuries before, during Rome's earliest years.

This gossip about Damaris was slipped in. Hagar knew Serena didn't like tittle-tattle about her fellow vestals.

Serena yawned. She had heard all these complaints before. Hagar thrived on them. "I'm sure that Lady Damaris had very good reason for her absence."

"Hmph! Good, indeed!"

Serena was firm. "Good night, dear Hagar. Don't wake me on any account until after sunrise."

Thanks to the Falernian wine, she fell asleep at once and began to dream as she frequently did these nights, and what she dreamed about would have horrified Maxima, the senior vestal, as it would delight the younger vestals. In some ways it horrified Serena to realized how far her own thoughts would go.

During recent nights she had been dreaming of one particular dark and aquiline face, the face of a man who was, no

doubt cruel, though he had always been most pleasant to her. A man frequently called handsome, but not by those in the Lady Maxima's highly moral circle. The senior vestal, who shared Serena's sporting interest in the races at the great Circus Maximus, claimed this man with the jaw-breaking name of Philip Sofonius Tigellinus, now city prefect of police, had once been a mere Sicilian horse dealer. She believed it. The strength in his powerful hands, the way he carried himself, with that stride which said 'here goes a man who conquered his own world'—all these things argued origins that had been anything but soft.

Serena knew she was dreaming. Even in her sleep she was aware that it was dangerous to dwell upon sexual desire, and above all, desire in connection with this man. The penalty for impurity in a vestal—being buried alive—was the most rigid, the most frightful in the Roman penal code. But she couldn't stop her dreams, nor did she wish to. In her sleep she stretched her hands along her ribs and hips, only half-covered in the warm Italian night, and imagined they were his sinewy ones. She pictured him crushing her body under his....

Serena groaned. In the midst of her erotic dreams she was being aroused by Hagar, who shook her bare shoulder vigorously.

She muttered and protested, but the old slave persisted, "Wake up, my lady. You're wanted. They asked for you especially."

"Not another will! I never saw such a season for negative thoughts." Serena turned over to avoid Hagar's stern, accusing face. But knowing she had lost the struggle, she yawned and asked plaintively as she set one bare foot on the mosaic floor, "Is there something in the air? Everyone imagines he is about to die."

"It isn't quite a matter of wills, my lady. But it was you they asked for by name. They said you knew nearly as much as a physician about sickness."

I can thank the good Xenophen for that, Serena thought. The elderly physician was a gifted man who used common sense, herbs, and an occasional dose of mandragora juice for pain. He was a big improvement over the usual Near Eastern physician who depended on incantations and incense. Serena had watched him perform many cures and operations.

So she was wanted at midnight to help Xenophen. Serena hurriedly got up, blinking in the sudden light. Hagar was

handing a lamp-boat from a hook in the wall, and the lamp swung precariously, filling the little room with oil smoke.

In the doorway opening upon the cool green interior garden, the old woman asked, "Shall I send for one of the slaves to help me dress you and arrange your hair, my lady?"

Serena knew it was a mere rhetorical question. Hagar would be deeply hurt if Serena said yes. Instead she asked, "Why? Is the visit that important?"

"They want you on Palatine Hill. In the palace itself."

That startled Serena. Her palace connections were nebulous. She knew the stammering old Emperor Claudius as a learned man, well-meaning but without the aura of authority expected of a Caesar. His early taste for nubile females had gradually metamorphosed into a passion for rich food, and the more the better.

Serena admired the new empress, Agrippina, whose preimperial years had been difficult and often tragic. Her son Nero, an athletic, lively boy of seventeen, was a good deal more popular than the emperor's own fourteen-year-old son, Britannicus, and if the latter should become emperor, there would be trouble in Rome; the sickly, whining boy seemed to be much disliked. Was Britannicus ill again? She started to ask but was cut off by Hagar's querulous voice.

"The emperor needs you. He's taken sick."

"What? But I'm no physician!" No one with any sense would want to treat the head of the state for an illness. The possibility of his death was always present, and when it came to parcelling out punishment, what victim more handy than the physician who had treated him? Besides, it was considered bad luck to Rome for a vestal to wander so freely and alone about the city.

The vestals had tasks enough to perform as part of their sacred duties. Their house was the only one of major importance not to have running water. It was considered "proper" that they should draw water from one fountain in the entire city. They must knead their own bread and cakes. They must daily scrub and clean the little round Temple of Vesta and hang sacred laurel around the pillars. No slave was permitted to perform these ordinarily menial tasks. Above all, they tended the sacred fire, the little flame whose existence was a symbol of Rome's stability.

Their reward? The six vestals were the most respected women in the empire. Even empresses must wait ten or

twenty years before being addressed with the supremely respectful title of *augusta*, most high, most august of women.

Until her assignment to wills, Serena knew very little about Rome. Her father had been Roman governor in the lush, fertile, yet mysterious new province of Central Gaul. He and his wife settled long enough for Serena's birth in the town of Lutetia. This little city between right and left banks of a river in north-central Gaul was the home of the Parisii, a Celtic tribe. They preferred Roman law, order and sophisticated life to the degradations of the Teutonic tribes who had swept across Gaul in all their savagery every few years until the Romans fortified the Rhine River.

Serena remembered little of Lutetia except that both banks surrounding the tiny island were very green, cool, and everyone went in fear of an ancient Parisii religion called Druidism. There was a charming little forum established on the left bank, which the rapidly sophisticated Parisii found as fascinating as the Romans did. But then, after Serena's Parisii nurse took her into the forest one night and showed her the cavorting of strange, theatrical creatures—humans in costumes of animals, with blood sacrifices—there had come the request by Serena's highborn aunt in Rome. The child was given the significant honor of being trained as a vestal. This would certainly banish the fears of Serena's mother that the impressionable child might fall into the barbarous ways of the Druid religion.

Much as three-year-old Serena dreaded leaving her parents, the journey down through Gaul to upper Italy and on toward magic, sparkling Rome soon took her thoughts from what she had lost. And lost it was! Two years later, her father and mother, now stationed at Colonia on the Rhine, were massacred when the post was overrun by the wild, yellow-haired Teutons.

By this time Serena's real love was the Vestal Order. Rome therefore remained a huge jumble of noise, strangers, and crime to her—until recently.

"Why don't they call upon Xenophen?" she asked Hagar. "There's no better physician."

Hagar shrugged. "They say he's gone to a villa at Baiae to attend some rich knight with a broken thigh. Xenophen's slaves and someone inside the palace told them you could help the emperor. Something he's eaten. Mushrooms, they say."

It sounded like the usual gluttony for which the emperor

was famous. Nevertheless, there was nothing to do but obey the summons. Nor did it help to have Hagar mutter darkly, "I hope they *were* mushrooms the old man ate. If they were the poisoned variety . . ."

"Hagar, don't!" The very thought terrified Serena. There had been too much of that sort of thing in the palace during the reign of the previous emperor, Caligula. And when the blame was parceled out, the easiest target was always the physician.

Serena hastily slipped on the brief tunic she wore next to her flesh, and the old slave helped her into the pristine freshness of the white gown which along with her carefully plaited hair, marked the dignity and power of her Vestal Order. The soft, carefully placed folds of her thin wool palla gave the final appropriate touch. This almost transparent mantle was draped over her figure from her wheat-colored hair and her gown to her sandals with their white lacing. The mantle helped to implement the grace of movement instilled in Serena from her earliest years as a Vestal.

She was past twenty-four now, and shortly after her thirtieth year might, if she chose, renounce her vows of chastity and become an ordinary Roman female of the upper class from which she had come. Until the last few unsettling weeks, the idea of renouncing her vows at the proper age in future had never occurred to Serena. There was no position she could gain in all the Roman world, including that of empress, that would equal the dignity and honor of her present post. And in general, the vestal's life was far happier than that of most women, especially women over twenty.

But what of physical love, which she had not yet experienced?

The thought was unnerving, and she turned away quickly from her reflection in the polished hanging salver that she used for the intricate arrangements of her hair.

"Calling a vestal to cure the emperor of indigestion! What next?" the slave muttered, pinning one hem of the feather-light mantle through the hair on the crown of Serena's head so that the material flowed gently around her with one end tossed over her shoulder. "If it were that nice young Nero, one might understand it. He's so popular with the public. . . . My lady, would you believe the head of the Fullers' Guild, he said to me only this morning when he delivered the clean gowns for the vestal ladies, 'a pity young Nero isn't the

emperor's heir. What an emperor he would make! He cares for the people. Not like the senators. Those old goats! They care for nothing but their ancient privileges.' That's what the Fullers' Guild thinks."

Serena shook the old woman's wrist as a warning. The garden beyond the open door was faintly illuminated by the stars overhead, and seemed empty. But any of the servants might be listening out in that green enclosure where the perfume and color of roses filled the air, even now, in late fall of the year.

"Hush! Do you want someone to hear you?"

Hagar bellowed, "What? I thought we had done with spies when they got rid of that terrible Caligula. Old Emperor Claudius is a good man. Good, I say! Shall I wake the bearers and order your litter?"

Serena smiled at this obvious attempt to placate whoever might be listening, but refused the litter. Then she sent the old woman off to rouse one of the slave boys who would act as her lantern-bearer through the dark streets. The city grew more and more crime-ridden with every year that passed, but her destination was near enough so that she could feel safe, even at this hour.

She went quickly toward the atrium with its ghostly statues of ancient vestals. She smiled and waved a hand in greeting as she passed the young novice, Damaris, who was on her way for the first time to guard the sacred vestal flame, the very heart and spirit of Rome itself, secluded in its little round temple beyond the House of the Vestals. The fact that it was a mere symbolic guardianship did not relieve the girl's nerves, obviously. Either the legend had been too firmly implanted in her head that the snuffing of that little flame would be followed by the fall of Rome, or something else, more immediate, was on her mind. Damaris gave Serena a helpless look, questioning and fearful, and the older woman smiled her reassurance.

Poor thing! Serena thought, remembering her own first attendance at this supreme religious task. No one had told the girl that if the flame did blow out through one cause or another, such a fact would be publicly denied by even the most holy of the vestals, the flame relighted, and no one the wiser except the inattentive young novice.

One must be practical. This was a lesson Serena had learned during the long years of her service to the beloved

hearth goddess and to Rome. Thinking of that young novice she had just passed, Serena wondered if she herself had begun to lose faith in the omen of such ceremonies.

In other gods, maybe. But not in good, gentle Vesta, the hearth goddess of Rome.

"Serena, my dear? Is that you?"

The voice came from somewhere in the darkness behind her. She retraced her steps to the garden, where she made out the form of Lady Maxima, her superior, the vigorous, motherly senior vestal. The older woman made a graceful gesture with one forefinger toward the box under Serena's arm.

"Wax tablets, stylus, and papyrus? To take down someone's will, I suppose. What luckless fellow thinks he is dying this time?"

"The emperor, my lady. They say it's indigestion, and his physician is out of town." She held up the box. "I am carrying mandragora for pain. Herbs to help his digestion. Mulsum to induce vomiting. And feathers for the same purpose." She grinned shakily. "Let's hope one of them cures him."

She felt the change, the nervous stiffening in the senior vestal. She suspected the older woman's fear had some other source than concern for the success of Serena's treatment. Everyone knew how frequently the emperor suffered from indigestion.

"Ah! You are going to the palace at this hour?"

Lady Maxima had been standing in front of the fountain whose thin spray caught the starlight. By that aura of light Serena saw the vestal's thin, wrinkled eyelids flicker, and her own nerves tightened.

"To . . . to the new banquet hall, with your permission."

"I see."

Serena was sure the chief vestal would now broach the dangerous subject. It was clear that she had suspicions. Although Serena was physically innocent of any wrongdoing, her thoughts, and especially her dreams, were not so pure. Sometimes the chief vestal's faded, watery hazel eyes unnerved her. They saw so deep beneath the surface of things.

Serena said hurriedly, "If you believe I shouldn't go, most august lady, please tell me. Please forbid me. It would make it much simpler."

"Serena . . ." the vestal began, giving her the look which seemed to read her thoughts. "Philip Tigellinus, the prefect of police, has visited our temple and this house twice in the past

ten days with very feeble excuses. Something about examining the walls and furnishings to see that they were safe in case of fire. Safe? After two centuries?" She laughed gently, but Serena did not trust the humor behind that laugh. "My dear child, when someone like the Prefect Philip does anything feebly, I am at once on guard. He is a very reckless man. But you know that, of course."

Serena tried to turn the subject so slightly that Lady Maxima would not guess what had happened. "Of course, my lady. You yourself told me Prefect Philip once drove four-horse chariots in the Circus Maximus. Came in first, when you laid bets on him, you said. For the Green Faction."

"Yes. A reckless man and a very *physical* one as well, I suspect. Serena, child, be warned."

Until this minute Serena's efforts to evade the prefect of police, the most powerful official in Rome after the emperor and the old Praetorian prefect, had been based upon her fear of the sensual effect he had upon her thoughts. But she knew the threat which the chief vestal hinted at.

She raised her chin, looking Lady Maxima in the eye, and said evenly, "If I were to commit sacrilege with this man, I would be sentenced to be buried alive."

Lady Maxima agreed. "Just so. And he would be tortured and publicly disgraced before death." The night air seemed very still. Serena was certain she heard her own stifling heart-beat.

The senior vestal seemed to feel that her point had been made. She put out one hand, rearranged the palla's transparent folds over Serena's light hair, and remarked, "It is really too bad that you have become such a beauty. It only brings trouble. I see it in more virulent form in the case of our young Damaris. There are secrets in her life. She worries me. . . . Go, now! The palace will be expecting you."

Serena felt a sudden impulse to hug this wise, motherly woman, but instead murmured, "Thank you, august lady," and left the garden, keenly aware that the senior vestal's thoughtful, not altogether approving gaze followed her.

Out in the deserted Forum between the Vestals' House and the round, pillared temple to the gentle hearth goddess, Serena stood a minute or two, breathing deeply of the autumn air. The city's crowded hills, enclosing the forum on all sides, seemed to be asleep. Few lights were visible. After her conversation with Lady Maxima, the thought of those streets and

tenements, the public houses and the mansions, brought to her mind the prefect who controlled the peace of this vast city, his oblique, slanting eyes as he had looked at her during her last visit to the gladiatorial games a month ago. His persistent attention disturbed her so much that she hadn't gone to the games since.

But then he had made excuses to visit her at the Temple of Vesta and at the Vestals' House, where only the good sense and tact of the chief vestal prevented their seeing each other. Serena could imagine the shock and scandal that would have been the result of their meeting. It was idiocy to think of him. She must avoid him at all costs. Even gossip about herself and the prefect could be deadly.

Was she walking into another trap tonight? Would he be on the Palatine making a report to the emperor, or perhaps the empress? According to gossip, he had once been Agrippina's lover, before she married the old emperor. Perhaps Agrippina still loved him.

Gods! Serena thought. Am I jealous of an empress?

Serena knew that in some years she would be permitted to leave the order, and to love, or marry whom she chose. But until then, there was her oath of chastity, there were her duties with the order, and there was the terrible penalty if she failed to keep her oath.

The slave boy sent by Hagar appeared, announcing that he was Loki, and swinging his lantern through the night darkness, so that the flame and smoke threatened to engulf his Germanic light hair. "Ready, my lady?"

"Ready." She took a step, then asked him, "Have you been on the Palatine tonight, Loki?"

He grinned. "The old lady . . ." He saw her frown and corrected himself hastily, "I mean, the Lady Maxima sent me to the empress for charity clothes. The empress gave me a tunic for myself besides. Hardly used. It belonged to Prince Nero, who's outgrown it. The Lady Maxima says I can wear it when I go to the games."

"Did you see anyone else of importance at the palace? Either of the young princes?" She added nervously, "Or the . . . the city prefect of police, for instance?" She breathed more freely when he shook his head.

"The Prefect Philip? No, my lady. They say he's due back tomorrow from Ostia. He's been waiting for the corn ships from Egypt. They are late again. I heard the empress say

there'll be riots in the city if there's a bread shortage because of it."

"I'm sure she was joking. There haven't been riots for several months. Now, shall we go?"

The House of the Vestals lay deep in the shadow below the Palatine Hill, and although she did not feel comfortable walking almost alone in that great darkness of a city she still knew very little, Serena needed no litter to carry her up to the palace. She signaled the boy to go ahead of her with the lantern. He bounded nimbly up a long flight of steps, across Victory Hill Street and up the last staircase leading to the labyrinth of impressive marble buildings and terraces on top of the hill.

Hearing shouts and screams, and the usual noise of a scuffle somewhere farther along the street, Serena frowned and looked uneasily into the darkness. The street curved around the hill, and she saw only a senator above her, stumbling down the palace steps, heavily supported by two body slaves. They all tottered off in the direction where scuffling seemed to have silenced the recent screams.

Still worried over the source of the screams, Serena ordered Loki, "See what is happening around the corner beyond the steps. I'll send down someone from the palace."

The boy made a face, wrinkling his nose, but started off. She called to him, "Don't draw attention to yourself. No need in your being attacked too." She saw by his expression that he heartily agreed with her.

She hurried up the long flight of steps. She had gone about halfway when two soldiers, laughing at some joke between them, came out on the broad terrace at the top of the steps and then started rapidly down. Their body armor and the great plumed helmets they had just settled over their heads told her they were Praetorians, members of the most elite corps of the empire, and personal protectors of the emperor. It was the Praetorian guards who had taken it upon themselves to assassinate the previous emperor, Gaius, called Caligula, and placed his uncle Claudius upon the throne, to the great satisfaction of the city, which had experienced Caligula's homicidal madness at much too close range. Beyond the city, the empire itself had little to say about the change of rule, but found the governmental system quite as well-run as during the previous reign.

Though she was not enamored of their arrogance and war-

like appearance, Serena felt no fear of them. Whatever the crimes against the civilians in the streets, no one had ever committed the sacrilege of accosting one of Rome's six vestals. She kept on climbing the steps, prepared to incline her head at their respectful greeting as she passed them.

With a sudden uneasiness, she saw that they deliberately changed their direction, crossing the steps toward her.

"Officer," she called to the first of the soldiers, a heavy, square man who ran his tongue over his thick lower lip as he watched her face in the starlight. "Would you please see what has happened beyond the steps? Down Victory Hill Street. I heard screams."

The Praetorian's burly comrade grinned. "Burbix, tell the beauty to come with us. That's a pretty dark street for just two little lads to wander down alone."

She pretended not to hear this and was more amazed than alarmed when the one called Burbix reached out to catch her shoulder as she passed him.

"Come along with us, Carissima . . . a real beauty, Aulus. Look at that hair. Like new-minted gold auriae. Give us a kiss, Carissima."

She pulled herself away, still hardly believing what had happened. The Praetorians had left the great doors open from the closest entrance hall of the palace, and she could hear distant sounds, a harp's pleasant somnolent music roused to wildness by occasional cymbals, flutes, and oriental bells. These had originally been intended to stir to life the dying sexual prowess of the old emperor, not to mention that of the imperial guests. But no one had remembered to silence them. Shadows moved against the lamplight inside the first hall, and Serena raised her voice, hoping to get help from some of the emperor's guests or perhaps the palace slaves. Sacrilege was still a serious matter to many in Rome, including the emperor and Agrippina.

"This is sacrilege. I am a vestal. Take care."

Finding herself caught between the two soldiers and trying to avoid the wine breath they exhaled in her face, she cried out, "Sacrilege! Let me go!"

She could hardly believe this was happening to her. No one in her life had ever behaved with such alarming familiarity. Her angry cry, punctuated by indignation, the shock of having force used against her for the first time, had cut through the clear night air, and she was certain someone must have

already started to her rescue. But her attackers, like herself, were also used to having their way. The one called Burbix ran one arm around her slim waist, binding her to him so tight her breasts in their thin covering swelled warmly over his flesh, while his other hand closed on her mouth.

"Here's a ripe handful!" he exclaimed. "Damned if I couldn't take her here and now! We'll just get her down beyond the steps, on Victory Street. It's dark there."

She struggled frantically. This was the first time a man had spoken of her in such a lustful and contemptuous way. It was ghastly to find herself helpless in the hands of dirty, foul-smelling drunkards attempting a rape which would be sacrilege as well. Even if she survived, the defilement itself would sentence her to the supreme punishment of burial alive.

Burbix lifted her off her feet amid the encouragement of his companion, who started to his aid as she kicked backward viciously with her heavy-soled sandals.

They were all too busy scuffling and breathing hard now to see the stir above them, a shadow that lengthened and increased in size as it approached the terrace overhead. Then the heavy, running footsteps down the wide stairs above them. But no one could miss the deep, harsh snap of the voice that called them to attention.

"Burbix! Aulus! Report to your barracks!"

Burbix looked up, trying to brazen out a dangerous situation. "We don't take orders from the police, Prefect. We are soldiers. Praetorians!"

"You'll be dead Praetorians if you don't get your tails back to your barracks."

The prefect of police, Philip Tigellinus, his dark Sicilian head uncovered, carved a path between the two men with the air of his crested metal helmet, which provided a potent if surprising weapon.

Though she regarded Philip as far the most dangerous of the three, she had never known such relief as she felt now when the pawing hands fell away from her. A new experience had come to her, bringing with it knowledge of a horror formerly beyond her imagination. Now, during the first minutes of her rescue, even her rescuer began to seem a part of that revulsion. His appearance was so providential, Serena could not prevent the unkind suspicion that he might have staged the whole thing.

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The two Praetorians hesitated, but Burbix soon turned his back and started so rapidly down the steps he tripped over his own heavy sandals. He was followed by his companion with equal haste.

As Serena recovered, rearranging the careful folds of her gown and palla with shaking fingers, Philip started to take her arm. She knew he had said something, made some brief apology for the conduct of the men, but without intending to, she shuddered at his touch and he dropped his hand. His close proximity was as disturbing as she recalled from past meetings. Not the man himself, sardonic and arrogant, rapidly becoming the master of the Roman world, but the dangerously masculine sensuality she felt in him, a fire which might not merely warm but would consume her as well.

"My slave said you were in Ostia."

She was immediately sorry she had mentioned this, since it indicated her interest in his whereabouts. He said coolly but with some amusement, "No. I am definitely in Rome."

He made no further effort to touch her, but she was aware that those disconcerting dark eyes of his were reading her face much too closely. She hurried her steps. She still felt the defilement of the Praetorians' touch. The lamps along the walls of the entrance hall illuminated the terrace, and Serena could not avoid noticing two palace guests, a man and a woman, on a cushion beneath a frowning statue of the late Emperor Augustus. The pair wore nothing but gauze dinner tunics, and were joined together in an act that was as obvious to Serena as that of a pair of tight-locked street dogs.

Fascinated but appalled, she stared for a moment at the writhing, grunting lovers, and then, recalled to herself, looked in shock toward Tigellinus. The prefect said teasingly, "Don't look at me like that. I've no intention of raping you in public, Lady Serena."

She tried for an appearance as unyielding and dignified as Lady Maxima would have provided. It wasn't easy. Not only had she flushed at a remark no man heretofore dared make to her, but she was worried for fear one of the imperial servants or wandering, half-drunken guests had overheard him. She said shakily, "Please be quiet! A remark like that could ruin me and could cost you your life."

"It might be worth it."

Alarmed, she looked at him, saw that he was smiling, and wanted to slap him, but the thought of the questions that would be asked by a dozen witnesses restrained her. Even so, she realized their conversation had been overheard by a pretty, half-nude slave girl in her early teens, who pushed her way through the watching servants and addressed Serena. The girl's diaphanous gown was laced over one shoulder, leaving one small, rosy breast with its childish nipple exposed for the titillation of the emperor's more depraved guests. Unfortunately, the exposure only reminded the ordinary viewer of the girl's recent lost innocence.

"I am Acté, august lady. I am in the imperial service. The empress is waiting for you."

It didn't surprise Serena that she should receive her orders from the Empress Agrippina rather than in the emperor's name. No one doubted the empress's capabilities. She and her son Nero inherited the genius of the Caesars, Julius and Augustus, as well as the fiery blood of Mark Antony. Politics and mastery were in her soul.

With her body still sore from the recent encounter, and troubled over the physical nearness of the prefect, Serena caught herself going in the opposite direction. "I can hardly find my way. The Palatine seems more like a labyrinth whenever I visit the palace."

"They keep adding rooms, my lady, every time they add more political secretaries and more advisers." The little dark slave girl held out her hands and received the box of medicines.

Before following the girl past the huge, incurious Nubian doorkeepers, Serena turned to Philip. Under one arm he had stuck his gleaming helmet with its red brush of plumes that represented a commander in the army as well as his police position. He held out his free hand to her.

"From here on it will all be strictly a matter of your medical skills, but I wanted to thank you for coming. I know how

little reward there is for anyone in your position tonight. If it is any comfort to you, I'll see that no matter what happens, none of the blame will be yours."

It was a curious thing to say. True, perhaps, and a consolation, but it hinted the emperor might be more seriously ill than Serena had guessed. The omens were all bad; yet everyone knew that Emperor Claudius was a glutton. He might have eaten too fast, drunk too much wine. Anything.

As Tigellinus hurried her along behind the slave girl, she asked, "Can it really be indigestion? Or just too much wine?"

"I hope so. I still don't know why they had to bring you into it. You aren't a physician. What can you do?"

Common sense was in short supply at court, she thought. Maybe that was her greatest asset. His flat, undiplomatic statement about the emperor's illness made her more uneasy. "But what else could it be?"

He said sardonically, "It seems there is some question about a recipe called mushrooms in liquamen sauce."

Worse than she had thought. Was the court returning to the horrible "poison" talk that had been so pervasive during the Emperor Caligula's reign? She began to understand why the chief vestal and then Tigellinus suggested that it was dangerous for her to treat the sick man. It was always unlucky to be present when there was a possibility that an emperor had been attacked. Witnesses were notoriously short-lived. Nevertheless, she said, "Ridiculous! Who on earth would want to poison the emperor? He has no real enemies. He is far more popular than Caligula was."

Tigellinus looked at her. He regarded her as a naive and sheltered female with no conception of the world's wickedness, and tonight she had very nearly proved it.

"Where power is concerned, a man always has enemies, Lady Serena. Remember that."

Annoyed at his superior attitude, she muttered, "You have soured on the world since you and Agrippina—I mean, the empress—were friends."

For the first time he smiled. It was an odd thing to smile over, and she wondered what his feelings were now toward the woman he had always served faithfully, as he now served her imperial husband. His brief smile faded. He told her, "I'm sorry she insisted we call on you. It was her son's idea. Nero says he's seen you help Xenophen. But frankly, it would be much better if you knew nothing about this business."

"Why? Someone must do something, and it's clear the poor man's drunken guests are helpless."

He reminded her without inflection, "It is dangerous because when emperors are poisoned there can be no witnesses left to tell of it."

Exactly her own thought. "But he was not poisoned! It was gluttony, you said." She insisted on that.

"Just so. Remember. Here we are."

Standing on the exquisite mosaics between the two great open doors, Serena found herself tongue-tied at the size of the new banqueting hall. The usual cozy Roman triclinium with its three couches, each accommodating three diners, had been multiplied, and multiplied again; so that Serena thought for a few seconds she was looking into endless mirrored images. The painted walls themselves helped to promote this image. Many of the guests had left their couches. A small round citruswood table at the head of the nearest trio of couches had been overturned, and one of these couches was the center of wild activity. So many people were milling around the couch, which the emperor had formerly occupied with his wife and a Judean prince, that Serena couldn't see the victim. Philip Tigellinus pushed through the nervous crowd, making a way for her.

At the heart of the melee the emperor sprawled upon the couch with both arms and his head extended awkwardly across the overturned table. He writhed in pain, and his groans cut into the noise around him.

Serena knew better than to touch the imperial patient before she had been given permission. She was startled when, instead of Philip, a youthful male voice presented her to the empress.

"This is the august Lady Serena, Mother. She knows practically everything old Xenophen knows. I saw her save a charioteer's life last month."

Serena did not have time to look around, but if the boy called the empress of Rome "Mother," he must be Nero. She hadn't known he was anywhere near her that day in the circus office when the circus manager, knowing her experiences with the surgeon Xenophen, asked her to attend an injured champion of the Blue racing faction. She glanced around a minute or two later, saw the red-haired, muscular youth, about seventeen, looking too heavy for his yellow wool-and-gauze dinner tunic, and recognized Nero, the young prince.

She knew she might need as many friends as possible if the emperor did not immediately recover.

"The gods be thanked! You've come at last," the Empress Agrippina cried. "Philip, bring her around here." Tigellinus did so. The empress and Nero's tutor, the philosopher Seneca, had been kneeling beside her husband. Seneca, middle-aged, intellectual, and impressively somber, startled Serena with his elegant silver dinner robe and flashing jewels. But the care with which he raised the empress to her feet was strictly philosophical, like that of an elderly retainer. He owed his entire career, even his life, to the empress; for he too had once called down the wrath of the late Emperor Gaius, Caligula.

Agrippina drew Serena toward the imperial couch. "It is his stomach. I told him not to eat that third plate of mushrooms. I begged him! But he never listens to me. The taster found nothing wrong. It's simply overeating."

The empress looked disheveled and scared, an unusual state for careful, infinitely proper Julia Agrippina. Strands of her elaborate coiffure hung loose about her broad, elegant face, and the kohl upon her eyelids had smeared so that she appeared to have received a black eye.

The empress explained breathlessly, "Every physician in Rome has been sent for. And astrologers. A Chaldean, too. As for me, I personally rely upon Stertinus Xenophen. There is no better physician in the empire. But when he failed me, my son thought of you."

The emperor thrashed about now in his discomfort. Serena raised his grizzled head. He was sweating profusely as he tried to make himself understood. "Belly . . . all on fire . . . burning . . . the pain!"

Seneca, the philosopher, cut in helplessly, "Something must be done. His Majesty is suffering." Everyone nodded, but the danger of touching an emperor, especially one who was possibly poisoned, was too obvious.

Serena said, "Majesty, you will feel better when you have given up all that food." At any other time, inexperienced as she was in dealing with the outside world, and especially its aristocrats, Serena would have been too overawed by her surroundings to criticize these people, but now, in the presence of suffering, she was disgusted with such ignorant, silly courtiers as crowded around the sick old man. Surely one of them should have had enough sense to know Claudius must vomit the poisonous mushrooms, if they were poisonous, and the

rest of that gluttonous meal he had poured, pushed, and shoved into his unfortunate stomach. Recognizing how helpless these mighty courtiers actually were in the face of emergency, Serena began to recover from the first cold terror that had paralyzed her when she entered the palace. She looked up, snapped orders: "Someone bring me a basin. You others—get me oil, water, warm water—and heat the mulsum you'll find in a jar in this box. He must be made to bring up all that he has eaten."

She might have known. It was Philip Tigellinus who carried out her orders in his coolly efficient way. People went running. A frail boy of fourteen or so, standing nearby, began to shiver and to moan, "Father! Don't leave me. . . . Please, please don't leave me alone. . . ."

Serena looked up. The poor boy was underfoot and serving no useful purpose. His presence was annoying, but she pitied him, recognizing that he was the emperor's sickly son Britannicus. She gave him an order, hoping to occupy his mind: "You, Highness, please bring me some napkins."

Her ploy failed. The boy went on trembling and biting his pale lips. "Don't die, Father. Please. . . ."

Impatient, she started to repeat her request, but young Nero had already carried out the instructions, and she thanked him. He shrugged, embarrassed and red-faced at the praise, but she could see that he enjoyed it.

The empress was pleased at the praise for her own son when the emperor's son had behaved so ingloriously. She suggested, "Someone should get a feather. That occasionally does the trick. Or . . . what do you think?" It was odd to see her so concerned, so disorganized. Julia Agrippina was a woman of enormous will and determination, used to giving, not taking orders.

Serena said, "Very likely, my lady. An excellent idea." Meanwhile, she took a wrapped chunk of hot stone from Philip and pressed it gently against the suffering man's stomach.

Behind her she heard two newly arrived physicians from the Near East, to judge by their outlandish costumes full of stars, crescent-moons, and signs of the zodiac. One of them recited with great self-satisfaction: "Two neats' tongues, the liver of a newly sacrificed dove, the proper incense, and a prayer to the god Ascalapius should be burned at once in the nearest lamp. That will assuage his Majesty's pain."

Serena rolled her eyes to express her disgust. Few Romans could be found in the art of healing because so little was known on the subject, but her experiences with these physicians from the Near East had given her even less respect for them.

She glanced around, seeing the room for the first time. Huge as it was, it managed to be almost as impressive as the new imperial baths. The walls were paneled with bright dinner scenes in red and brown and blue, with realistic golden yellows to relieve the heaviness of the dead poultry painted on large trays, and startling boars' heads staring out of empty eye sockets at the diner. Behind the painted food were panels of similar food settings within the scene. Endless painted scenes within scenes. A curious effect, as if the room embraced an unending world. Serena did not mind the audience of humans watching her work, but she avoided the eyes of all those painted dead fish, boars' heads, and young, tender, big-eyed kids. She took the hammered metal basin from two muscular hands and glanced up to see the prefect standing before her.

"Anything else?" he asked as he passed along to her the various food and condiments to induce vomiting.

She was too busy with the sick man to answer Philip. It seemed to her that the emperor suffered from nothing worse than a raw stomach. He retched now as she forced him to swallow the first nauseating concoction.

"Does it hurt him?" young Britannicus demanded anxiously, turning from his father to Serena. "I don't want to look." And then he began to cry while he clutched at Serena's hands, clawing her fingers painfully. "Let him go! You'll hurt him. I'll tell my sister on you. Octavia won't let you hurt him."

His stepbrother, Nero, muttered, "Don't be such a sniveling coward!"

Everyone, including Serena, looked around. It was an awkward moment, for Britannicus' young sister was married to Nero and disliked him intensely for his obvious male interest in her. She had refused to attend this imperial banquet with him, and everyone understood why the mention of her name had caused Nero to react so rudely. Nevertheless, he expressed the majority opinion. Nero's ruddy face flushed hotter at this attention from the entire party, but to his

frowning mother he insisted in a low voice, "It's true, all the same."

The empress made an effort to cover her son's rudeness by patting Britannicus' shoulder gently. "Your Highness, you should be resting. After all, you have only just gotten up from a sickbed. We will send you and your sister news of his imperial Majesty the very minute he recovers. . . . Seneca, you and one of the servants take the prince to his sister's quarters."

"Well . . ." It was plain that the boy wanted to go, much to Serena's relief; for he seriously hampered her efforts to help his father. "I'll go to Octavia."

The empress had the boy led out by the philosopher Seneca and a slave, the pretty dark girl named Acté, who seemed anxious to remain beside Nero. She obeyed, however. Although the boy Britannicus was not of the empress's own blood, it was clear that she felt his conduct, so distasteful to Romans, needed an excuse. She explained sympathetically, "He has never been well, poor boy!" Serena could hear the shocked comments buzzing through the room; "*Is that to be our next Caesar?*"

Serena suggested, "Someone should test the mushrooms and their sauce."

"I've ordered up a condemned criminal to the Palatine." It was Philip Tigellinus' voice.

She added, "I think it is only indigestion."

By the time the powerful, manacled prisoner had been brought into the banqueting hall, it seemed to Serena that Claudius was feeling better. Two basins were taken away, and his groans began to subside.

The rattle of chains called everyone's attention to the prisoner, whom they avoided so carefully that a wide path opened up for him and his two tough warders. Their dirty brown tunics and bearded faces set them apart from the elegant imperial guests, if the stench of their bodies had not.

"What is his crime?" Serena asked.

Tigellinus dismissed the question with contempt. "He is a patricide. Murdered his father over some brutality to his mother, who has since died."

There could be no greater crime than patricide in Rome, a city which revered its ancestry. Nevertheless, Serena said, "If he tests the food and lives, he must be pardoned."

Philip did not want to agree. He and the warders ex-

changed glances that told Serena and the others clearly what they thought of clemency. The prefect said finally, "He must be exiled. He will never set foot on Roman soil again."

They would have to transport the prisoner half a world away to carry out this sentence, but the husky, unshaven young murderer, who had held himself with pride and bravado until Serena's words gave him hope, now broke down and cried, "Thank you, august lady. Thank you. And would you . . . will you pray the gods to forgive me? Lycon is my name, and I beg you—"

He would have gone on his knees to touch her sleeve, but his warders pulled him back with a heavy clanking of chains that grated on her nerves. While the nervous courtiers and their women stared, Tigellinus received a freshly heated plate of mushrooms with their prepared liquamen sauce, a seasoning sauce with a fish base common to many Roman recipes. He offered it to the prisoner. Halotus, the official taster, stood by trembling. Would they accuse him of having prepared his own stomach against poison? If the convict died, suspicion would certainly fall upon the taster.

The prisoner's hand shook as it reached for a spoon still lying where the emperor had dropped it, below the little inlaid table. The prisoner raised his other manacled hand to his dirty cheek, rubbed it; licked his lips, and began to eat.

Silence had fallen over the big room. The Empress Agrippina, clutching Tigellinus' forearm, stared wide-eyed at the man as he took a spoonful of mushrooms and savory sauce, swallowed hard, and waited. Nothing happened. He scratched his tousled black hair with the spoon, dipped it into the mushrooms, brought it to his trembling mouth, swallowed with difficulty.

By the time he had finished the plateful, his courage returned. He grinned up at Philip Tigellinus, whose attentive dark eyes might have scared a less desperate man.

The sick-sweet odor of the Syrian doctors' recipe burning in the oil of a lamp boat began to make the guests cough. These jarring sounds, plus the obvious good health of both the prisoner and the official taster, caused laughter, and the party revived again. Everyone wanted to talk at the same time. The empress came to Serena, knelt with graceful ease in her black gown sewn with delicate cobwebs of gold. During this brief time she had managed to smooth and rearrange her hair. She was still a trifle pale, but nothing could subdue the

proud strength in that profile which would look so splendid on a Roman coin. As the worst appeared to be over, Serena could reassure her, wondering at her own boldness in speaking to the empress as to a mere patient's wife.

"His Majesty is easier now, and the mushrooms seem to have been safe. Sometimes, when a prepared liquamen sauce is used, it goes sour too quickly. But of course, the palace cooks prepare their own fresh sauce for each meal?"

Agrippina nodded. "And all of us were served from the same recipe. It's just as I thought. Gluttony!"

The emperor tried to haul himself around into a more comfortable position, still muttering, "My belly . . . if I could disgorge all I ate . . ."

Serena motioned for another basin. Nero gave it to her, but even he turned away in discomfort as the old man strained and retched vainly. The quill end of a peacock feather was put into Serena's fingers, and she took it automatically without looking around. She wedged it between Claudius' teeth. The tickling effect upon the palate usually precipitated the patient's vomiting. In a few seconds it seemed about to accomplish its purpose. The old man thrashed about. Serena and the empress could barely hold him. Nero and Philip reached over to help the women. The emperor gave a curious, strangling sound that lingered upon the air and made the guests shudder. At the empress's gesture two of the emperor's body slaves knelt to lift him up, but under Serena's startled, anxious eyes, the emperor screamed something inaudible and tried to retch again. He writhed in his agony.

"Gods! What is it?" Agrippina asked in a shaken voice. "Claudius! Dearest! . . . Should we raise his head? He looks so dreadfully uncomfortable." She was one of those otherwise capable women who are not good around sick people, and Serena was too busy to answer her.

Serena signaled. The two male slaves glanced at the empress, and receiving her nod of approval, they raised Claudius again. Serena tried to insert the quill between his teeth once more, but they were locked tightly. He made a gurgling noise in his throat. His heavy head fell forward against her hands.

The room silenced again. The only sound was the grating of the nervous prisoner's manacles.

How much time had passed? Serena looked across the

room at the ornate water clock but could not read it. Tigellinus knelt on one knee and touched the emperor's cold, moist forehead. Then he put his hand over the sick man's heart. When he raised his eyes and Serena asked softly, "Is he . . .?" the prefect did not answer.

Agrippina had seen the brief exchange between her ex-lover and the vestal. She picked nervously at Serena's sleeve.

"He can't be dead. No!"

The ripple of shock spread through the banqueting hall. Fifty guests asked themselves secretly, "How will this affect me? Who will be the power back of that sickly boy Britannicus?" And others, more daring, questioned even this: "Suppose someone else is elected emperor. Whom will the Senate choose? How will the change in power affect us?"

Serena tried to smooth the rumpled gray hair of the old man. Did anyone here really care whether he was alive or dead? Would they miss the old man who had made a good job of a task he never wanted in the first place?

The empress was wringing her hands. "Tell me, someone! Philip!"

Tigellinus answered her rudely, "Of course he is not dead. Can't you see? His is unconscious. A strain on his heart, but no more."

Hardly believing what she heard, Serena looked up, caught the expression in Philip's eyes. A warning to silence. No mistake about that. She tried to speak, found her throat dry, and in the end, said nothing. There must be reasons, state reasons. She could not interfere. She let the emperor's head fall as gently as possible, and watched while the badly shaken empress ordered a litter for her husband.

With an effort Agrippina smiled at the tense crowd. "We will let him sleep it off. Our celebration of the Augustan Festival seems to have ended rather abruptly. I've sent for Sterninius Xenophen, the best physician in Rome, and I have every hope that his Majesty and I will see you all at the games tomorrow."

It took considerable time for the big room to be emptied. Among the first to leave were the prison warders and their prisoner, Lycon, who, in spite of his chains, was grinning from ear to ear. Several guests had fallen into drunken sleep earlier on their couches and now were being helped to their litters on the street below the terraces. Others made their way

out of the palace in some confusion, not knowing what to believe about the emperor's state of health.

"Good girl! You have saved yourself—and maybe the empire," Philip muttered to Serena before he followed the emperor's litter out of the banquet hall. Serena flushed angrily. She wanted no praise for a forced lie. But if the emperor was dead, and had died in her arms, how easy for the court to make her the scapegoat!

No one thought of the shaking, terrified boy in the doorway. Serena, starting out, saw Britannicus, who had gotten away from his guardians and come hurrying back during the commotion. She put her hand on the boy's narrow, bony shoulder.

"You must be brave, your Highness. I know you have courage."

Britannicus did not cry. He looked like blue-veined marble. He was badly shaken but managed to whisper spitefully, "Did they pay you to make him suffer? Did you kill him?"

Nero, who had picked up Serena's materials and come out after her, stared nearsightedly at his stepbrother and said in his blunt way, "He doesn't know what he is talking about. He ought to sit down. He is shaking."

Serena snapped, "You would be too, if your father had just . . ." But of course Nero's father had died some years ago. "Never mind!" She did not appreciate his defense of her. She would have preferred that he hadn't heard a word of his stepbrother's accusation. She tried to get Britannicus to sit down, for he looked as if he might faint, but he shocked her by his thin, watery smile.

"Maybe you didn't do it. Who do you suppose did? It could have been anyone. Even Nero, my loving brother. Even me. . . . Only, I don't want to be emperor. *I don't want it!*"

"That isn't true, and you must not say such things. The royal taster is still well and healthy; so is the criminal who ate your father's food. So you see, you are very wrong in suspecting such a terrible thing."

She was certain the emperor had died, and she had not said so. Now she lied to his son. Was this what the wise Lady Maxima had meant when she warned Serena against too many worldly contacts?

But worst of all, Serena despised herself for the secret belief that fear for her own safety had caused her to lie.

# 3

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Nero stood beside Serena watching the slaves carry away the young prince's litter. Britannicus laughed softly, and waved a frail hand at everyone as he left.

"Is he mad?" Nero asked curiously. "What does he think is so funny?"

"It's hysteria, I imagine. Poor child! And with the weight of the entire world on his shoulders."

Nero said indifferently, "I don't envy him." Then he grimaced. "It's my mother I'm sorry for. She's gone through so much for me. Even when I was young. Old Claudius' ex-wife, that nauseating Messalina, tried to have me killed when I was a baby. Did you know that?"

Serena had heard the gossip at the time but was intelligent enough to say now, "I knew there was an attempt on your life. However . . ."

He scarcely heard her. "And later, Mother hadn't a sesterce to support us, but she managed somehow. Philip Tigellinus helped us, of course. And when she married the old emperor . . . I know it was for me. To make me one of her precious patricians, like our ancestors. But the thing she doesn't understand . . ." In spite of his shortsightedness, his gaze held her by its intensity. "Lady Serena, I don't want to be an elegant patrician. Right here . . . in my heart . . . I'm a plebeian. The happiest time I ever knew was when I was a child and we were poor. All I really want is to write my poems, to create music for the human voice, make people happy." He blurted out, "In the theater, I mean."

That was a shock. Nothing could be more degrading in the eyes of a Roman aristocrat than to appear as an entertainer. Serena was inclined to believe him, but she asked, "You don't envy your young stepbrother, even though he may be Caesar by morning?" Trying to preserve some semblance of honesty, she went on, "Or at this very minute."

Startled, Nero looked around. "Is he really dead, then?"

"Certainly not, your Highness. You heard the prefect. Besides, if he were dead, the Senate would have to be informed, so that they may choose the next emperor. And the senators I've seen here tonight aren't in very good condition to choose anyone, much less an emperor."

Serena wondered if Nero was remembering how the present Emperor Claudius had been chosen by the all-powerful Praetorian guard after they murdered his infamous predecessor. There had been no "asking the advice of the Senate" about that! They proclaimed the trembling Claudius emperor and announced their decision to the Senate, which trembled on its own behalf and almost unanimously affirmed their choice.

"I ought to go," Nero ventured, curiously hesitant. "Mother should have help at a time like this." But he seemed to want to stay by her. She thought with a hint of envy: Your mother won't need you. She has Philip Tigellinus. Fortunately, she didn't say this aloud.

She saw several senators who had not yet left the Palatine. They were standing at the end of a narrow corridor leading to the older section of the palace. They looked like conspirators, talking in low tones, glancing over their shoulders, and then resuming their secretive behavior.

Nero saw them too. "Why do you suppose they're looking at you like that? I hope they don't think you are responsible for my stepfather's sickness." He added with an endearing juvenile enthusiasm, "You're awfully pretty, Lady Serena. They probably wish you weren't a vestal."

"They are more likely looking at your Highness. You have behaved very well, in the circumstances. Your mother will be proud of you."

He wasn't as pleased as she expected. "She's never proud of me. I'm not regal enough. I never will be. I can't be her image." He shrugged, then suddenly lowered his voice, startling her with his sharp whisper: "She's the one who'd like to be emperor. Not me. If they could make a woman into a Caesar, the material's all there."

She ignored such dangerous remarks. "You should go to her at once. And meanwhile I must go home. I imagine the streets are safe by now." She was much too casual in saying that. She knew the danger. At this midnight hour the dark streets of the capital would be full of footpads, cutthroats,

and all too many of the so-called gilded youth who thought it amusing to steal cloaks, leave aged senators naked and humiliated, assault and perhaps rape decent females. . . .

Something in her side glance, the doubting frown, caught him. He flushed, whether with anger or embarrassment, she couldn't be sure.

"All right. I've been with some of the fellows. I've led some! It's . . . well, it's the thing to do. Proves you're a man. But if you think I'd ever let them hurt a hair of your head . . ."

"I know that, Highness."

He snapped, "Don't call me Highness. I'm Nero." He lost his artificial hauteur in a flash, a reaction that was so like him! "I'd never hurt you. When I was a child a vestal sat with me evenings, all those times Mother was out trying to persuade Caligula to give us an allowance. If it hadn't been for Mother and Tigellinus, and maybe the vestals who helped us, I'd have starved to death. And Caligula was Mother's own brother!" His quick spurt of anger evaporated as it always did. He was not like his mother in that. The Empress Agrippina could hold a grudge forever until she found a way to even an old score. "People say Caligula was mad," he went on, having considered the matter in his brief, heedless way. "Do you suppose he was?" He shivered and grinned. "Hope it doesn't run through the family."

She smiled, which he found reassuring. "Your Uncle Caligula was maddened by so much power. No one man should hold that much power. That's why we have the Senate and the Roman people, as a counterweight."

Nero shrugged. "I just wonder what Britannicus will do with all that power. Do you think he'll listen to Mother at all?"

"I'm not a high priest. Only a vestal. I can't look into the future. Maybe it's just as well."

The huddle of senators broke up, and two of them came back toward Serena. Nero muttered, "What do those old jars of fat want?"

"Hush! You'll make them angry. . . . Greetings, Marcus Lucius Cato. And you, sir, are . . . Cornelius Lentulus; isn't it so? A sad end to your banquet." She felt that something should be added, and remembered Agrippina's promise. "But I'm sure his Majesty will be at the games tomorrow as usual."

Marcus Lucius Cato, a short, red-faced, shrewd little man,

gathered his toga around him with that dignity which the robe bestowed upon all its wearers.

"To be sure, august lady. To be sure. But if poison was involved, we would like you to testify to what you yourself have seen."

"You were called to the Palatine to record Caesar's will, I suppose, my lady, because of the . . . er . . . bad mushrooms," Lentulus put in, trying by amusing twitches of his eyes and eyebrows to make her know they could not talk in the presence of the emperor's stepson.

"No," she said pleasantly. "His Majesty did not—does not—expect to die."

"What!" They both were puzzled. "That can't be."

Nero put in huffily, "Are you doubting Lady Serena's word?"

"Highness," she cut him off. "Your mother will be needing you."

Everyone looked surprised at her familiarity, except Nero, who subsided, grinned unexpectedly, and agreed. "I'm sorry, I'll be on my way. Maybe I'll go and cheer up our new . . . that is, my crybaby stepbrother." He turned, walked into Philip Tigellinus, begged pardon, and went on his way. The senators were obviously surprised that the prince had yielded before the prefect, and Serena reminded them, "His Highness was tutored in sports by his Excellency. Isn't that so, Prefect?"

Philip was obviously concerned over graver matters. "Of course. Lady Serena, his Majesty is asking for you."

The presence of the dark, powerful Sicilian discomfited the two senators. Cato would not have retreated in so cowardly a fashion, but Lentulus was ready to bow out. Cato saved face by saying to Serena before joining his fellow senator, "We will resume our discussion later."

"What was that about?" Philip asked, taking Serena's arm.

"I've no idea." Nor would she have told him, had she known. If he expected her to keep secrets and lies, told by him and the empress, he must expect her to protect senatorial secrets as well. It seemed obvious that the two senators had been delegated to inquire about the real cause of the emperor's illness. Or his death. It would be of great strategic and political importance for the Senate to know exactly when Caesar died. Otherwise, they might find themselves once more

outmaneuvered by the Praetorian guard when it came to choosing the next imperial Caesar.

She nodded to the senator before going in the opposite direction with the prefect. Tigellinus remarked, "I'm glad you get on so well with young Nero."

"I wish his mother understood him better."

He was surprised. "She certainly has his best interests at heart. Everything she has done in her life has been for him."

"That's exactly the trouble. He doesn't want to be the next in line after Britannicus."

"So he says."

"And so he means. If you and his mother understood him better . . . but I doubt if the empress ever will. And there is liable to be trouble in that quarter if you and she keep forcing him into some mold that he doesn't fit." She saw that she had caught his attention, and added, "No one will be more relieved than Nero when Britannicus marries and has heirs."

"Lucky Nero to have such a defender."

She glanced at him in time to catch a surprising warmth in his dark eyes, which had so often been called "cruel," "relentless," and "terrifying." The awareness of that look was like a burning deep within her body. Hot and painful, yet welcome in some frightening way. She supposed it was only the sexual attraction between them, and with it the deadly danger to them both that could strike as a result of that attraction, if anyone guessed its existence.

Serena pulled herself together, firmly shaking herself free of his presence.

"But tell me why I am wanted. Surely, not by the emperor!"

"You know as well as I do, he is dead."

She had known the truth; yet when he made the flat statement, it was shocking, especially so in view of the young Britannicus' state of health. It was inconceivable that such a frightened, weak, self-pitying child should know the first thing about ruling a great nation of free men. If Rome were the ancient Persian Empire, with satrapies peopled by slaves and masters only, he might do as he liked, or as his sick mind dictated, but no matter how much power a man like Caligula had possessed, Rome had finally destroyed him, even if it was necessary to assassinate that power-mad young man. She said tartly, "And I imagine if the emperor's successor steps out of line, he will be murdered, as Caligula was."

That stirred Philip's anger. He himself had taken no part in the previous emperor's assassination, but he felt the guilt of the elite corps, since he had risen to power as a result of that murder.

"You are not usually so stupid, Serena. You know perfectly well that those assassins carried out the will of the Roman people. They'd had enough. Murder, torture, sacrilege. Every crime Caligula's twisted little brain could conceive. But the guard doesn't go around stabbing emperors at will."

They had reached the gardens recently planted along the widest terrace facing the city. Across the garden, around the shallow pool faintly rippled by the night breeze, Serena saw a door ajar. She recalled that it was a part of the empress's new quarters. She wondered ironically if poor old Emperor Claudius had finally gotten into his wife's bedroom, even if it took death to get him there.

She answered her companion's remark with quiet deadliness. "I know the guard doesn't go around stabbing emperors. Why such a messy thing as a stabbing when a plate of mushrooms will do the trick?"

He stopped. In the moonlight his face lost the deep, swarthy look of some Moorish ancestor. Had she actually shaken him? She couldn't believe it. He said in a clipped, official voice, "I hope you aren't going to repeat that remark all over Rome. It isn't funny, and it could cost you yourself some difficulty as well."

She was very light, very easy. "I agree, it isn't funny. When I wander all over Rome gossiping, as you imply, it will be on a subject a little wittier than the death of a kind old man."

She expected his apology, but none came. Chilled, she began to believe there had been truth in her remark. Instead, he said crisply, "Wait here. I'll have you taken back to the Vestals' House."

"It isn't necessary. One of the slave boys is waiting for me."

He surprised her by his quick anger. "You know better than that. You had one street encounter tonight already. I'll be back as soon as I've seen to the empress's affairs. I won't be long."

What was he so angry about? Surely, in view of the present circumstances, he had more to worry about than the safety of a woman with whom he had tried to carry on a mere flirta-

tion. She shrugged, moved no farther. She watched him turn and cross the gardens, beyond the banquet chamber, where slaves were now cleaning up the debris amid much chatter.

A male voice whispered, "Lady Serena."

She swung around, wondering and uneasy. The whisper suggested secrecy, and there had been enough secrecy tonight. Senator Cato came out from behind the heavy double doors of the banquet hall, for all the world like a sneaking assassin. He held up both pudgy hands.

"Don't be alarmed, august lady. It's only that we haven't given up hope of getting your help."

She did not want to be party to any more secrets, and said tiredly, "So much has happened, Senator. I'm expected at the Vestals' House. There is nothing I can do to help you. Or anyone." She pulled the soft palla forward over her hair and around her shoulder, half-concealing her face. "Farewell for tonight. We should all go home and offer prayers for the emperor."

His heavy lips curled slightly. "Pray for a dead man?"

She stared at him. "You know nothing of the sort."

Over his shoulder he waved to attract his fellow senators. They seemed to squeeze out of the very marble of the pillars, four of them, with their eyes fixed on her, and moved to surround her. They did not look as though they meant to harm her, but she could not doubt their deep seriousness, and she recalled all too vividly that this must be how such toga-clad men looked to Julius Caesar, many years ago, as they closed in for the kill.

They demanded at once how far Senator Cato had gotten with Serena. The senator explained to her briskly, "We have formed a committee to investigate what we believe to have been the murder of the emperor."

"It was overeating that made him ill," she insisted, shaken by the recurrence of her own doubts.

"He is dead, and not of gluttony, my lady. We believe it was poison. Before we set senatorial approval upon that half-mad young weakling Britannicus, we must be quite certain he didn't murder his own father."

She thought she had never heard anything more ridiculous, and said so, with indignation. "He couldn't possibly have done so. He is not strong enough. How could he have . . . ? Oh, but this is too ridiculous!"

Senator Lentulus reminded her, "We saw him laughing in

the doorway when his father was carried out. There was no compassion in that evil little face! His stepbrother, Nero—now, there's a likely lad. He was perfectly disgusted by the young prince's behavior."

Senator Cato said, "Look to the man who profits by the old Caesar's death, and you will find the poisoner. Who else but young Britannicus? Besides, he is undoubtedly mad."

"Not mad at all. He is sickly, but his brain is perfectly normal. You saw how he didn't want his father hurt when we were treating him."

"He didn't want his father treated. That is why he made all those sickening, unmanly protests. Why doesn't he ever join the other lads? He never plays, never tries for the Youth of Rome Award, which Nero has won. You won't see young Nero sulking in his bedchamber all day. He's out taking his lumps and giving them, like any normal Roman lad."

Others nodded. She started to make another denial—it was an incredible suspicion!—but Senator Cato stopped all the muttered talk by his abrupt plea, "Our senatorial committee knows you are one of the few persons that we can trust who has access to the Palatine. And the Imperial Party trusts you. We discovered that when they sent for you tonight. We ask you to help us find evidence against the poisoner." Before she could refuse, he silenced her objections sternly, "Or would you be satisfied to see Rome fall once more into the hands of a murderer like Caligula? We will none of us be safe. And you, august lady, forgive me for saying so, but you know too much. You would be the first to go!"

# 4

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In the end, she agreed, chiefly because it seemed the only way to prove to these dangerously determined senators how unfair they were to the sick boy. But she could hardly concentrate on their request or their farfetched theory of Britannicus' guilt. Too many other suspicions and doubts were running through her brain as Senator Cato and his slaves insisted on escorting her home. How could the emperor have died of mushroom poisoning when neither his official taster, Halotus, nor the condemned prisoner showed any signs of illness?

Gluttony had killed Claudius. The last vice permitted to the old emperor.

By the time Serena reached the Vestals' House, Hagar had finally fallen asleep, a relief to Serena, who remained tense and worried over possible repercussions after the emperor's death. She knew it was always difficult to keep secrets from the devoted, opinionated old slave.

Silently Serena changed for sleep and once more stretched her tired body on her narrow bed. The faint crunch of a sandal upon the mosaic tile floor made her stifle a sigh. She hadn't eluded Hagar's eagle eye, after all.

But the little silhouette she saw in the doorway against the moonlit garden beyond was certainly not muscular, flat-footed Hagar.

"Hush, please. It's me. Damaris. Can I talk to you?"

Serena roused herself to attention. The senior vestal had been concerned about the young novice.

"Of course. I'll send for—what shall it be . . . Setinian? Falernian?"

"Anything. That vinegary posca the slaves drink. It doesn't matter." Damaris waved her hands wildly in the air, though she had good sense enough to keep her voice down. "I'm so

unhappy! Nobody knows. I have to talk to someone or I'll go mad."

Serena was alarmed but said calmly, "You won't go mad. You have friends. Sit down and tell me about it." From what she could see of the girl in the dim light, Damaris seemed more defiant than frightened, which puzzled her.

"I can't sit down. I've got to know. Serena, is it possible to stop being a vestal?"

Serena caught her breath. She glanced quickly at the open doorway. "Damaris, be very careful. You must know how dangerous such talk can be. And anyway, you don't mean—"

"I do. I do."

"Be quiet. If you were believed, you could be executed; don't you know that?"

Damaris stopped waving her hands and settled tentatively on the carved metal edge of the bed. The bed creaked eerily. Serena suspected the girl was shivering.

"They wouldn't. Would they?" She watched Serena in the half-dark, saw her nod, and whispered, on the verge of tears, "I never knew a vestal to be executed. Isn't there any way out of the sisterhood?"

"Damaris, what is it? It isn't a hard life, or difficult. You are given respect, you are supported. You needn't live in a tenement room under the thumb of your father or husband."

"My uncle and aunt pushed and pushed to make them accept me. They pointed out all the noble contributions of my father to the state, and finally I was chosen to be trained for a vestal. But it's a life you don't chose yourself."

"If you were out there in the city, you probably wouldn't be allowed to chose your life or your husband either. Tell me what it is, Damaris, specifically. Are you bored with the vestal life? Perhaps we can give you some task more challenging." Maybe Damaris' problem was simple boredom with a daily routine. But even to talk of the girl's unhappiness was dangerous. The situation could prove deadly to the whole sisterhood if anyone knew or a servant gossiped.

"Can't you tell me what is really troubling you, Damaris? If I don't know, I can't help you."

The girl had begun to bite her fingernails, but stopped and whispered suddenly, "What is it like to love a man? Really love, I mean. Physically."

Serena looked anxiously over the girl's head toward the doorway before murmuring, "They say it is only a slight titil-

lation, nothing, surely. Like a tickling sensation, magnified." Feeling a terrible hypocrite, she dismissed the whole of sexual happiness. "We are well out of such experiences. Damaris, is there someone?"

To her relief, the girl shook her head, gulping and swallowing her tears. "Of course not! It's only that I've begun to wonder lately. You see, I've been reading poetry. Not the usual Horace or Virgil, but . . . well, some of Virgil. In the *Aenead*, Niobe loves Aeneas so much. I wanted to know what such feelings must be like."

At this clue to Damaris' very youthful experience, Serena wanted to laugh, with a note of hysterical relief. Luckily for her effort to help the girl, she controlled herself.

"Damaris, it is the nature of poetry to distill all emotions, boil them down like . . . like liquamen sauce, which everyone uses in cooking. That means poets often exaggerate emotions, just as a sauce gets thicker when it is boiled down to its essence."

Damaris wrinkled her pert nose. "You make it sound so prosaic. Not a grand passion at all, but just a kitchen sauce."

"And so it is!" Serena insisted, writhing within at her own hypocrisy.

In the darkness she heard and sympathized with Damaris' big, gusty sigh. The girl got up.

"Well, I feel better now . . . I think."

Serena went with her to the garden, promising, "I'll think of something. You want to keep yourself occupied. Some interesting and challenging task. That's the answer."

*And for me too*, she thought as she watched the girl move away through the waning moonlight like a delicate white moth.

She was startled when Hagar's hoarse whisper came close to her ear. "Trouble in that quarter. You'll see. Don't you get mixed into it, my lady."

More exasperated than afraid, Serena said sternly, "Hagar, go back to bed and stop spying, or I'll have you sold into a Syrian whorehouse!"

Hagar chuckled. "Ha! I'd probably give 'em their money's worth. 'Night, my lady."

"Good night!"

She went back to her bed, and after some effort, managed to subdue her thoughts, doubts, questions, and the worry over young Damaris' discontent. The girl was too young to have

all these pressures fighting within her. Something had to be done.

She was tired enough by this time to sleep well in spite of the evening's danger and excitement, capped by the young novice's problem.

She awakened during the second hour of an exquisite October morning and was interrupted while eating her breakfast of coarse bread dipped in honey. Lady Maxima, the senior vestal, found her and Hagar in the little library/counting-room whose folding doors were open to the cool, dew-covered garden. Lady Maxima said, unexpectedly excited, "Serena, my dear, you won't believe what confusion there is in the streets. When the matter is confirmed, they are bound to call upon us for the consecration to the goddess."

Serena set the last broken crust of bread upon the marble taboret beside her. "You may take the tray, Hagar." And to the chief vestal, "What is it, my lady? What's happened?"

"The emperor is dead."

"Yes."

The chief vestal was astonished. She and the old slave woman, who had noted Serena's too-quick response, stared at her. "But how could you know?"

Serena backtracked in some confusion. "He became sick at dinner last night. He had three dishes of dressed mushrooms. Everyone said it was too much. . . . Has the Senate met to vote on his successor?"

With the privilege of long familiarity, Hagar cut in, "I said it before. I say it now. We are all going to suffer for it. That wretched little Britannicus will be another Caligula, mark me!"

Lady Maxima waved her to silence. "Hush! Now, Serena, it is clear that you know more about events on the Palatine than you should. I hope you have behaved discreetly."

Serena spoke in a hurry. "I tried not to say anything, my lady. Please don't mention that I knew. It was accidental. The empress called me to help, you remember. Xenophen was off in Baiae, and the other court physicians could do nothing."

"You may go," Lady Maxima told Hagar. Even when she and Serena were alone, she lowered her voice. "While you slept, you had a visitor. We could not, of course, permit him to see you, but he is sure to return."

Serena watched her own reflection in the polished silver

mirror, marveling that it remained absolutely calm. "Who was my visitor? Several senators spoke to me in the palace."

"This was the city prefect of police."

"Oh?"

"You are in grave danger, Serena. I hope you understand that. There are situations in which it would be impossible to protect you."

Resenting this implication of her own emotional weakness, Serena said indignantly, "My lady, I hope you don't believe I would yield to that man's . . . desires. Whatever they may be."

The chief vestal was as shocked as Serena. "Certainly not! I had quite a different problem in mind. Is it possible you know too much? You treated the emperor, and he is dead. If all goes naturally and young Britannicus is proclaimed today, your knowledge will have no significance. But if something else occurs, then your knowledge of the exact circumstances in which the emperor died could be dangerous. To you. You understand me?"

"I . . . think so." Was it possible Philip Tigellinus meant to destroy her literally, as a witness? No! Not Philip. It was this doubt which cut so sharply, the thought that Tigellinus himself was capable of such a crime. To protect whom? Himself, Agrippina, Britannicus, or Nero?

"It was overeating. Nothing else," she insisted, as much to convince herself as to persuade the chief vestal that the emperor's death had been a natural one.

"All the same, I suggest you absent yourself from Vesta's service this morning. Everything very natural. No official duties. Unofficially, however . . . I am worried about young Damaris."

Was she mind reading again? Serena began apologetically, "It's only her age, I think, my lady. She is curious about the world outside. But it will pass."

"Let us hope so. She is the first vestal in my experience to suffer from discontent. This morning I sent her to visit her uncle and aunt. The aunt has been ill, she tells me. I wonder . . . Serena?"

"My lady?"

"I thought you might go also. With a gift for the sick aunt. Let's say, a little amphora of honey." She accepted Serena's questioning look blandly. "You will be avoiding Philip Tigellinus, and at the same time discovering if the lady actually

has been ill, or if it is merely a convenient story made up by Damaris."

"Oh, no! Surely not."

"I hope you are right." She shrugged, as if to shake off unpleasantness. "Incidentally, the uncle is a devotee of the Circus Maximus. See if you can get any inside information on the next chariot races. I've a few denarii I'm burning to lose. Meanwhile, I'll talk to Tigellinus myself the next time he comes here. The less you see of him, the better."

This was undoubtedly true, though painful.

She saw the senior vestal staring thoughtfully at the literary scrolls whose red place-mark tabs hung down in neat rows from the cubicles. Lady Maxima ran her finger over the surface of one red tab. The color seemed to suggest something. She said, "I hope there will be no bloodshed over this imperial succession. All the same"—she shook her head—"I am like Hagar. I don't care to think of a sickly, half-educated boy like Britannicus ruling us. When I recall his mother, that harlot Messalina . . ."

To conceal her own misgivings, Serena remarked as she left to dress for her uninvited visit, "I've no doubt the empress will support the boy. After all, she chose men like bluff old Burrus and Seneca, the philosopher, to educate Nero."

Behind her, Lady Maxima sniffed almost as disdainfully as Hagar might have done. "I find that a poor recommendation. Seneca may be a Stoic in theory, but he practices all the vices of the Epicureans. The gods protect us from such hypocrites!"

Serena reminded her, "He hasn't done so badly with Nero."

Leaving the Lady Maxima in more or less agreement, Serena had her hair arranged in the old-fashioned Grecian style expected of her, with ribbons threaded in the sacred six bands through the high-piled curls. She was always impatient during this operation, and by the time the hairdressers were finished, she had fully dressed herself in the pure white of her office, with the delicate palla ready to be draped over the crest of her hair, its folds then falling gracefully around her tall, apparently fragile body.

She started from her room intending to go out through the atrium to the Forum, but stopped upon hearing a well-remembered voice: Philip Tigellinus'. He looked absurdly out

of place surrounded by the pale statues of ancient senior vestals. He had just spoken Serena's name to Lady Maxima, who was saying pleasantly, "She has gone to Senator Catellus' villa to take down a new will. The senator plans to marry again. A fourth time, I believe."

For a few seconds Serena stood in the shadow of a marble column, enjoying what the sight of him did to her, and facing the truth. Any tie between them must be purely physical. No more. His tunic armor revealed the muscular power of his shoulders and thighs. Nothing about his thin black half-cape, or the sharp, hawklike profile, softened the initial impression she had of him. He was quite capable of murdering the Emperor Claudius. Had he done so?

Replies to the chief vestal, the prefect smiled, shrugged. Serena wondered if Maxima was at all swayed by that unexpected, warm smile. "August lady, we both know Senator Catellus is up in the north at his lake villa. I had no idea you sent your vestals that far."

Without so much as blinking, Lady Maxima murmured innocently, "Really? So far away! Well, I don't doubt you know these things better than we do. Here in the temple we get so little palace gossip."

In spite of her own dangerous situation, Serena couldn't help being amused at the prefect's expression. It was probably the first time he had ever been called a "gossip." She waited no longer but slipped out a small alley door between the garden and the atrium itself.

One of Philip's men stood between the temple and the Vestals' House, with his back to Serena. Like the majority of the city prefect's men, this one wore the uniform of a fire-fighter, fires being a matter of far greater concern to the average citizen than the ever-rising crime rate. His armor was blinding in the sunlight and attracted the covert side glances of the Forum crowd. It was easy enough for Serena to slip around to the back of the house, where six slaves were waiting with her litter.

They seemed to understand without being told that they were to avoid the prefect and his men. Their way through the heart of the city and toward the Esquiline Hill was made easy by the respect in which the vestals were held. Everyone stepped aside for them. Even the Praetorian prefect Burrus, riding beside his charioteer in a four-horse chariot, saluted her as he passed. During the daylight hours the prefects and

other high officers were the only persons allowed to bring wheeled vehicles through the streets. The law had seemed a good idea to relieve congestion, but during the years since Julius Caesar rammed it through the Senate, it had only made the nights hideous. Every horse, mule, and metal-wheeled cart now rattled over the cobblestones from dark until dawn.

Serena, who had parted the curtains of the litter in order to answer the officer's salute, thought the rough soldier who was young Nero's tutor had never looked so excited. Could it be that he was now guardian and tutor to the new emperor, Britannicus? It would explain his hurry and what seemed to be panic in his face and stiff, nervous figure. It took a good deal to upset this man, who had been a soldier in the field and not just a uniformed palace favorite.

It was well into the third hour of the morning, and Damaris' uncle, a lawyer, would soon be on his way to a law court in one of the basilicas. Serena suggested the litter bearers take the short route straight through the Subura slum district to the Esquiline Hill, where Damaris' relations had a fashionable ground-floor apartment in one of the new buildings.

Loki, the slave boy who walked beside her litter, pointed out some surprising sights as the procession, led by her lictor, who made way for the litter bearers, swayed through a crowded street deeply shadowed by five- and six-story tenements, which, though fire traps, were eagerly sought after in this, the capital of the world.

Many of the old wooden buildings appeared to be propped against each other, or lurching over the street. Some of the most flimsily constructed were the newest. It was a source of wonder to Serena that a nation which built so much of enduring value throughout the world should permit such shoddy work at home. But profit was an all-important motive, and these tenements unquestionably made a profit. They were always fully rented.

Loki came close to the litter, lowering his shrill young voice. "August lady, would you like to see a real live poisoner?"

"What? Where?"

Loki made a discreet sign toward a quietly attractive woman in her forties, elderly by Roman standards. She was walking toward a shop that sold cheap spices and perfumes.

Serena could hardly believe such a charge against this blue-eyed female in a matronly violet stole laced under and over the breasts to show off an excellent figure. Her gold hair was probably dyed, but this was a common enough custom among patrician women.

"She's called Locusta. Empress Messalina used to come to her on the sly. And Emperor Caligula sent to Locusta for some of her poisons now and then. She called them 'perfumes.' "

Shocked at the openness of such a trade, Serena muttered, "I can't believe it." But of course she did. "Tell me, Loki, does anyone from the Palatine nowdays trade with her?"

Loki had stubbed his bare toe on the broken edge of a paving stone and was nursing his sandal while sucking in his breath. He shrugged. She thought he deliberately avoided her eyes.

"Maybe, august lady. Maybe not. They say she is the best. But it's better not to know who does business with her. People who know too much, they might get sick."

"Loki!"

"Well, it's true. Look, my lady—over there was a fire last night. See the top floors of that insula on the street ahead? They say the wicked Christians pray for the destruction of Rome. Some Christians live in this street. When the fire was burning, everyone heard them call down their god to destroy 'wicked, pagan Rome.' That's what they called us. They have secret meetings at night, in the dark." With another look around, he confided, "It's said they eat human flesh."

She laughed her scorn of such absurdities. "If that were so, they would be outlawed. They are still very much here." She knew little about the philosophical sect except that its fanatics had been known to pray publicly for the destruction of "sinful" Rome, but Rome paid little attention to fanatics, or to their intolerant religions. There were a thousand religions. There was only one Rome.

But she was curious about the poisoner Locusta. It was also unnerving to see the woman stop in the doorway of her herb-and-perfume shop and look back over her shoulder—stare directly at the litter carrying the vestal virgin. Worse than that, her pale blue eyes, looking tired and harassed, seemed to concentrate on Serena's face. Serena stood it for perhaps a full minute; then, hiding a shudder, she signaled to

Loki, who called out, an octave below his normal tones, "Get on, men!"

The lictor signalled in turn. The bearers raised the white-and-gold litter and started over the paving stones, up to one of the marble-faced five-story buildings that crowned the Esquiline Hill. Like the poorest tenement, this building also had its layers of rich business and professional families occupying the first three floors, with a modestly successful contractor on the fourth floor and a bankrupt knight and his wife in the garret apartment, whose best feature was its view. The garret's worst features were lack of heat in damp winters, intense heat in hot Italian summers, and the necessity of using the public privy in the inner courtyard five flights below. But the address was splendid, and one had to keep up appearances at all costs.

Serena, who detested litters and much preferred to travel by means of her own swift, leggy stride, dismissed the bearers. When Loki had announced her to the austere old Greek guarding the heavy, metal-studded door of Damaris' family's apartment, Serena gave Loki and the other servants a half-hour's leisure until her visit (with the unpleasant spying connotation) was ended.

She was still waiting to be received when Loki took off on a run to wager his latest cache of savings—fifteen sesterces—on the Green in tomorrow's chariot races. Obviously, her visit was inconvenient to the family. She hated herself and her sickeningly sweet excuse for the visit, the little jar of honey; yet she knew how important it was to conduct this spying expedition herself, so that whatever happened, whatever she discovered, no one else need know.

The old Greek doorkeeper inclined his head to her and waved her before him through a marble-pillared passage to the distant peristyle and garden, where she would apparently be received. The garden was framed by plane trees and mimosa, making the air so full of greenery that for a minute or two Serena couldn't see more than the blurred outlines of two young people in front of the fountain. They were playing trignon, trying to keep four balls sailing through the air between them, the exercise punctuated by much laughter and Damaris' childish screams of delight or dismay at two-second intervals. The young man entertaining her with such marked success had everything to attract a susceptible girl. He appeared to be in his early twenties, almost excessively good-

looking, wearing nothing over his slender body but a short, thin athlete's tunic almost the color of the golden curls that fluttered about his brow as he ducked and grabbed to retrieve the trignon balls. His clear blue eyes held such sincerity it almost seemed practiced to Serena's observation.

The doorman retreated silently, leaving Serena to make excuses for her unexpected visit. It was uncomfortable, because she could see at once that she had spoiled all Damaris' pleasure and excitement. The girl began to drop the balls as she stared at Serena in dismay.

"My lady!" And then, with a child's rudeness, "I suppose you came to spy on me."

Her handsome young companion had automatically continued to throw several balls while he stared at Serena. The balls rolled to Serena's feet, and he moved gracefully to pick them up while he reproached Damaris.

"I'm afraid Damaris has lost her manners, august lady. I am Leander Pella, her cousin. From Greece. Almost her brother, actually. It is an honor to meet you. Damaris has told me so much about you."

Damaris caught her breath, and Serena had no doubt his compliment was a lie. She wondered why such an empty politeness should bother the girl.

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Damaris belatedly mended her manners. "It was such a surprise to see you here, Lady Serena. I didn't mean to accuse you of spying. I mean . . . When Leander came back to Rome this month after so many years . . . But I forgot to tell you. I've known Leander—he's my uncle's cousin—since I was a baby."

"And you are still a baby," Leander reminded her, pinching the girl's cheek playfully.

It was clear to Serena that his touch made Damaris bloom, much as Serena reluctantly reacted under the attentions of the Prefect Tigellinus. She sympathized with the girl, but Damaris went on eagerly, perhaps unaware of her own danger, "He's been at the School for Physicians in Athens and the island of Cos, and all over the world almost. But now that he knows everything, he is going to practice in Rome."

"Please, Damaris, you embarrass me. I can only do my poor best." He directed this latter at Serena with great humility.

As Serena knew all too well, a shrewd man with a warm bedside manner could go far in Rome, even without formal training, and this young man, now using a trignon ball between two fingers to toss back his unruly blonde locks, might be a huge success. Serena could imagine his popularity with women. She was not entirely immune to his somewhat obvious charms herself. He was amusing in his way.

"I'm sure your best will be as good as any other's," she returned politely, but this was not enough for the enthusiastic Damaris.

"Oh, it will. It will! And I am going to ask the Lady Maxima if I can learn about sickness and treating people, just like you, Serena. Then I can help Leander. The way you help people like that old Stertinus Xenophen of Cos with his terrible bad breath and all his horrid medicines."

Both Serena and Leander laughed at this naive request to

learn about bad breath and horrid medicines, and Serena began to wonder if perhaps the young man really was as sincere as he pretended to be. So far in Serena's presence, he had treated Damaris like a very young cousin, plainly not encouraging anything more dangerous between them. The danger lay in Damaris' own natural sexual instincts, which had probably been aroused by her recent view of her cousin for the first time after many years. His arrival in Rome coincided exactly with Damaris' restless discontent at the Vestals' House.

Serena tried to reassure herself with the thought that Rome's handsome new physician was too ambitious for his own career to jeopardize honor and life in a deadly affair with his fourteen-year-old cousin. Yet she grew afraid when he touched his cousin. She saw the appreciative way he now glanced over the girl's budding breasts, which had grown tight and globular during the last year, so that even in the vestal's pure white gown Damaris had a senuous aura.

Serena felt the cool honey jar in her hands and explained at last, "Damaris, the august Lady Maxima has sent a little gift for your aunt's recovery. Would you be so good as to see that she receives it?" She held out the miniature amphora of honey.

Damaris hesitated with her hands outstretched. "Aunt Terentia? Y-yes. Thank you. Leander, would you take this to Aunt Terentia's bedchamber?"

From the quick, startled look he flashed her as he took the honey, Serena suspected the Lady Terentia Pella was not in the house. Surely, even Damaris knew better than to remain here alone with an attractive male who, in other circumstances, would have been an eligible suitor. The sooner Damaris was gotten out of here, the better.

Damaris stamped her dainty sandal on the grass and pouted. "Do go, Leander. We promise to wait for you, right here." She was looking so happy, glowing with femininity under the attention of her male cousin, that Serena hated to bring her back to the secluded life to which she had made her vows. But it must be done, and soon, before this relationship became more serious.

"I'm afraid we can't wait long for your cousin to return, Damaris. We really must go back, or we'll be having the Lady Maxima send out messengers to find me." She tried to keep her voice light, but the anxiety was there and she

couldn't hide it. She did not want the senior vestal to guess the particulars of Damaris' visit to her "sick aunt."

Damaris looked from Serena to her cousin Leander but got no help from him. He reminded her readily, "We mustn't have the senior vestal prowling about. It would be disastrous to cross her in any way. She might interfere with my practice of healing, and then you'd never see me all bad breath and horrid medicines."

Damaris laughed and gave in. "Oh, all right. I'm sure I didn't mean any harm. It's just that the whole world is doing such exciting things, and there I am—in that miserable old temple. Never really involved in life." A bubble of tears in her voice accompanied this. The feeling was genuine. Serena thought: The gods know I have felt the same since Philip Tigelinus looked at me.

She put her arm around the girl, admitted, "I know, dear, I really do understand. Now, if your good cousin Leander will excuse us, we must get you ready for your dreadful duties at the temple."

Damaris sighed, an enormous sigh that made her audience of two exchange smiles at the childish despair of the gesture. The girl clapped her hands for her aunt's body slave, and an elderly Cappadocian woman arrived with the pristine white palla which she and Serena arranged over the girl's wild, flyaway chestnut hair and let fall from her shoulders over her gown. Leander set down the honey, apparently deciding pretenses were over, and carefully rearranged the delicate cloth around Damaris' soft cheek. He was attracted to her. No mistake about that, Serena thought, after hoping against hope that he still regarded her as his "little cousin."

He gave the girl a cousinly kiss on that cheek, lingering momentarily, and backed away, saluting Serena. Damaris' face turned red as fire.

Leander sent the doorman to look for Loki, and himself escorted the two vestals to the street. To fill a silence which she found uncomfortable, and because she was genuinely curious, Serena asked the young physician, "Where will your offices be? Where will you practice? Upon the rich, or the poor?" She laughed to show him that she was joking, but she had little doubt of his answer.

"The rich, by all means, august lady, especially if you and your order can recommend me to the proper families. But my offices may be down there in the Subura when I begin.

It's a matter of rentals, you see. I must pay the quarterly rent first, purchase my medicines and 'cures.' Then find my patients. Not all patients would care to seek their cure in the Subura—alas!" His sigh was almost as young as Damaris', but more calculated.

Although Serena devoutly hoped he would not be involved with the Vestals' House in any way, she felt good manners demanded that she give him some hope for aid.

"Perhaps your fortunes will change. Your cousin's family, the Pellas, are influential in Rome."

"True. True. If I could meet the imperial family, for instance, what a help that would be! Damaris tells me you know Caesar and the two empresses, my lady."

"Not well. They are far above my touch."

"I see. Of course. But still . . . Well, no matter. One can only hope." It was clear that he had expected more of Serena.

She was relieved to make the approaching Loki her excuse for turning away. "There you are, Loki. Have you placed your bets?" Over her shoulder she threw her dismissal to Leander Pella. "Farewell, physician, and let us hope you needn't remain long in the Subura."

Leander took his dismissal cheerfully. "That will depend on my friends. I trust I can count you among them, my lady."

"Of course you can," Damaris put in with prickles of indignation.

He was so pleasantly persistent in his hints that Serena moved away. She was startled by Damaris behind her. The girl caught her breath sharply and clutched at Serena's arm as she whispered, "The police. Serena! It's that terrible man. Do you think Lady Maxima sent him to find me?"

"The Lady Maxima is much too busy to spy on you, Damaris. I advise you to say nothing about having seen your cousin. Why trouble her unnecessarily?"

"Thank you, dear, dear, Serena. I won't. Not for anything. . . . Oh, look! That awful man has stopped Leander."

Serena turned. Two men faced each other on the raised street cobbles, the young, slight Leander Pella and the prefect of police, Philip Tigellinus. She had assured Damaris there was no reason to worry about the "policeman." But something in Philip's stance as the two men met seemed challenging and ominous.

Young Leander looked apprehensive, an emotion Serena could well understand; for he appeared slighter than ever as he faced this embodiment of Roman law and Roman strength. Tigellinus appeared very much the police official. One sinewy hand rested upon his short sword. The other was extended, probably in a demand for the physician's identification.

Damaris ran to the rescue, and Serena, shamed by this prompt and unthinking heroism, followed more slowly, gathering around her the dignity of her office as she went. Among other vestal powers, Serena could order the release of a man taken in commission of a crime; so it seemed logical that a word from her would release the young Greek.

Meanwhile, Leander, with shaking hands, reached into the belt of his tunic, drew out a thin scroll which proved to be a letter sent by his Athenian teachers in which his qualifications from Delos, Cos, and Athens were set out.

Philip Tigellinus read aloud: "Cimon, son of Agas, of the School of Physicians, to all Roman citizens, know that Caius Leander Pella, a citizen of Rome, has completed three courses in the art of healing, plus astrology, Chaldean readings, and the usages of insect and bird life, et cetera, for these purposes."

The young Greek was growing more and more nervous. "I am qualified. I swear it!"

Philip looked up, demanded brusquely, "You intend to practice your profession on the Esquiline Hill?" He had seen Serena. She was sure of it. But for some reason, he refused to look in her direction.

"Not on the hill," Leander managed to explain. "No, Excellency. A room in the Subura. Cheaper, you understand." He went on rapidly, full of sudden hope, "If your Excellency could spread the word, I am well qualified. I've personally removed limbs and eyes. If you should have a duel or an accident with that sword, I would be more than happy to . . ."

Serena ran her hand over her lips to hide her smile. Tigellinus, however, was not amused. "Are you being funny?"

"No, Excellency. No, no, no. I only meant I would be happy to donate my services to your corps whenever they are needed."

Damaris tried to get between the two men, protesting, "He is my cousin, Excellency. He came to see my uncle, who wasn't at home. That is all." She got no further before the

prefect put her out of the way with impressive ease, and asked Serena a question whose purpose baffled the Greek and Damaris.

"No doubt you come to the rescue because he is a friend of your uncle as well? I congratulate"—he glanced at the scroll—"Roman citizen Leander Pella. It isn't every physician who acquires the friendship of two sacred vestals."

Disgusted at his behavior, and what seemed a pointless persecution of the physician, Serena said sternly, "Be kind enough to escort the Lady Damaris and me to the Vestals' House, and let the young man go his way. None of us are likely to bring about the fall of Rome."

Stunned, the prefect hesitated. It must be years since anyone had used that tone with him. He studied the scroll in his hands, then dismissed the Greek with a brief gesture, slapping the scroll into Leander's palm. The Greek thanked him profusely and dashed away, behaving, thought Serena, as young Loki would in the same situation, and she couldn't blame him.

By this time Philip had recovered his normal manner, with its underlying sardonic amusement. "I see I must repair certain damages. So . . . please accept my apologies, ladies. I appear to have been overzealous in my duties."

"Just what are your duties in this district, and at this hour?" Serena wanted to know, though she strongly suspected he might have followed her.

Damaris was already scared at the way Serena boldly challenged the prefect of police, and she tugged on the older vestal's sleeve, reminding her, "There is a litter at the street corner. A large one, with bearers. And two of the prefect's police. They mean to take us somewhere. To the Tullianum, maybe."

This was uncomfortably true, as Serena saw when she swung around to look, but she wouldn't give Philip the satisfaction of seeing her in a panic.

"Prison? Don't be silly! Prefect, is that litter for us? Do you think we are so weak we can't walk a mere mile back to the Vestals' House?"

He grinned at last. He must have recovered from that curious ill temper of his. "Not weak, Serena." Damaris stared, and he corrected himself quickly, "*Lady* Serena. But it is impossible for the proclamation to take place without the presence of all six vestals. In these circumstances, the *Lady*

Maxima managed to tell me where I might find you. It wasn't easy to persuade her." He reached for Serena, his fingers tightening their grip under her elbow. "Come along, ladies. No time to lose."

"Wh-what's happened? I d-don't understand," Damaris stammered breathlessly as he hurried her along with his other hand.

But Serena had guessed the truth. After she and Damaris took their places in the wide litter and were being transported at a jarring jog trot down the street toward the old Forum, Serena pushed the curtains aside. Philip strode along close beside her.

"Have they agreed upon the new emperor?"

He nodded. The early-afternoon sun glanced off his helmet, blinding her. She blinked, then looked again, covertly studying his profile, whose strength the high, crested helmet seemed to accentuate. A bird of prey? Unluckily, he caught her staring at him. She was sure he guessed her thoughts. In a hurry she tried to put his mind on other matters.

"Poor Rome! So we are to have another reign of weakness and madness, as we had under Caligula."

"Who knows?" It was said cheerfully enough.

She couldn't believe he favored the idea of an Emperor Britannicus, but what else was possible? He was the emperor's only legitimate son. The thing that seemed most curious was the prefect's own definite pleasure in the announcement that the new emperor had been chosen. It reminded her suddenly of Burrus, the prefect of the elite Praetorian guards, whom she had seen on her way to the Pella apartment. Burrus, too, showed signs of scarcely contained excitement. And pride? Well, pleasure, anyway.

She began to suspect the succession had not gone quite as miserably by rote as everyone, including the Senate, expected it to go.

"The new emperor will be proclaimed on the Palatine and from the *rostra* in the old Forum," Tigellinus explained. "We are on our way to the Forum now to receive our new Caesar."

It was what she expected, and yet, the very words of unlimited power—"our new Caesar"—chilled her.

Even before they reached the bottom of the hill, working their way into the busiest section of Rome, the litter bearers were forced to stop for cross traffic. Throngs of citizens,

slaves with very little to occupy their time, and foreigners—noncitizens from far-distant lands—poured across the path of the bearers on their way to the already crowded Forum.

Disaster struck as the litter bearers reached the Via Sacra and a fresh influx of citizens rushed toward the Forum for the pagaentry and entertainment to be provided by the government with its star entertainer, the new emperor. Everyone was tired of the old man, Claudius, and was looking forward to some sign of weakness, a slip or a fall, a faltering tongue perhaps, by Britannicus, whom gossip had heretofore dismissed as a coward and a weakling. The presentation promised to give Rome a few belly laughs.

But even the old Forum held only so many citizens, and was now jammed to capacity. Basilica and temple steps, window embrasures, and the Senate House—all were filled with the hastily gathered citizens. The new stream of Romans met an irresistible wall of elbows, heavy sandals, and shouted obscenities. The latecomers were pushed back, hurtled into the vestals' litter bearers, and two of the bearers on Serena's side fell to their knees. Screaming at the top of her lungs, Damaris tumbled over on top of Serena.

Tigellinus was there on the instant. He lifted Damaris out brusquely and stood her on the cobblestones, where bystanders, seeing her robes, muttered apologies and began to back away. Before he could reach for Serena, she had gotten to her feet, brushed herself off, and waved away his offered assistance. To soften the avoidance of his touch, she smiled, explained, "We'd do better to walk from here. The poor bearers are never going to get any farther."

She was afraid he would be angry again, but there was an amused glint of understanding in his eyes. For some reason, he seemed pleased by her obvious avoidance of him.

"Certainly, my lady."

Using his left arm as a buffer, he made a passage for the two vestals down the gentle slope flanking the Palatine, where there seemed to be considerable activity, and on into the heart of the Forum, not far beyond the graceful round Temple of Vesta. He pointed out the other vestals on the basilica steps, their white draperies fluttering in the afternoon breeze. Then, rather surreptitiously for so direct a man, Tigellinus lowered his hand, catching Serena's fingers. He did not look at her, but at her companion. "Lady Damaris, the senior vestal appears to be signaling to you."

Serena spoiled whatever scheme he had. "And to me. Many thanks for your aid, Prefect. . . . Come along, Damaris. They are waiting for us."

She had not wanted the prefect to know that his touch disturbed her in any way. That would have been worse than an outright courtesy on her part. But it was too late now. She was relieved when Damaris muttered, "Don't you find him awfully frightening, my lady?"

Serena confessed grimly, "Sometimes I find myself frightening." It was just as well that the girl didn't understand her.

The Lady Maxima received and added the two young women to her little flock with no comment but raised eyebrows. The other vestals gave them curious side glances, but the real attraction was the imperial group. The empress was assisted by Praetorian Prefect Burrus up the steps to the *rostra*, a speaking platform decorated with beaks from ancient galleys and sacred to great public announcements since the days of the republic. Curiously enough, the empress's stepson, Britannicus, her own son, Nero, and his sullen child-wife, Octavia, followed behind her. The empress was dazzling in black and silver, suitably sad but with a sparkle in her dark eyes and her very mien which was difficult to hide. No one doubted that she was in command of the entire situation. But the crowd shuffled their feet and glanced at each other.

"A pushy woman," was the low-voiced murmur spreading through the crowd.

Silence ruled minutes later as the Praetorians in gleaming armor and red-crested helmets took over the scene, flanking the imperial family and certain specially chosen senators. Serena was surprised and pleased to see Senator Cato on the *rostra*. How had he been persuaded? He looked troubled but not angry. Young Britannicus must have impressed him at last.

The rugged Burrus and Senator Cato, in an unlikely union, made little speeches, rousing those adherents who supported either the Praetorians or the Senate, and ended, in Burrus' words: ". . . our beloved youth, whose ancestors encompass the sublime Julius and Augustus. I present to you . . . Nero Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, our true and noble Caesar!"

The mob went wild. The young Nero had been their favorite for years. They all knew his wretched childhood, his mother's superhuman efforts to rear him in the manner of her great ancestors while fighting off attempts to assassinate her

and her son. Nothing had been spared them. They were forcibly separated by the Emperor Caligula, Agrippina's brother, for an imagined crime, and during her banishment the boy was carefully deprived of education, of decent living conditions, and often of food. From the degradation, and thanks to his iron-willed mother, had come this triumph today.

After a brief, graceful gesture from his mother, Nero stood forth now on that platform above the crowd. Lady Maxima nudged Serena and whispered, "He doesn't look as if he enjoyed becoming master of the world at seventeen."

Nor did he. Sturdy-limbed and powerful, he presented an athletic, likable modesty, all qualities much admired by the Romans crowding the Forum and the surrounding hillsides and streets. Almost before the Praetorians or the senators could give the signal, this shifting, yelling mob bound itself into one voice and bellowed: "Hail, Caesar!"

After that, the newly acclaimed Emperor Nero made the requisite speech, brief and to the point. His red hair was all on end, and in spite of the Praetorian armor someone had put on him, he seemed genuinely humbled by this enormous responsibility. Serena, watching the boy, remembered that only last night Nero had expressed pity for his stepbrother as future emperor. There had been no passionate ambition today. At this moment Nero would much rather be singing some composition of his own in a Greek amphitheater.

Yet he was the one who profited most from the death of the Emperor Claudius. It seemed incredible that he could have poisoned the old man for this moment which he clearly did not enjoy.

His young wife, Octavia, looked at Nero with such hatred that even some of the crowd noted it. Shifting from one foot to the other, the girl kept whispering to her brother, Britannicus, who nodded, with sullen glances at the new emperor. Serena pitied the brother and sister but couldn't help feeling relief that the degenerate Messalina's children would not rule Rome.

On the other hand, it was pleasant to see the interest the Empress Agrippina took in her stepchildren. While the new emperor expressed his gratitude to Rome, the Senate, and to her, she nodded, smiled faintly, but managed to press her strong hand upon Britannicus' nervous, twisting fingers, consoling him in his humiliation. She succeeded momentarily in comforting him. Serena could see the gratitude in his manner,

the almost desperate way he clung to her, unlike his sister, Octavia, who snatched her hand away whenever the empress tried to touch her in an effort at comfort.

The Emperor Nero had finished. Philip, on one side of him, and the Praetorian Burrus on the other brought their short swords to their breasts in salute. Serena could imagine their joy. Both men had helped to rear this boy who had become so well-liked and respected by the Romans that he, with the Senate, would now rule.

Serena and the senior vestal were near enough to hear the new emperor's excited shout to Burrus, "Tonight the password for the Praetorian guard shall be 'Best of Mothers!'"

He held the attention of the mob, but Lady Maxima remarked to Serena, "Look at the boy."

Wrapped in her selfish pleasure over the triumph of young Nero, who had always been kind to her, Serena turned to watch Britannicus. The boy who should have been hailed today was weeping uncontrollably. This sight ended forever any possibility that a Britannicus-for-Emperor Party might rise to support him.

"Poor thing!" Serena murmured, and heard Damaris gasp with pleasure, whispering in her ear, "He is truly the handsomest man I ever saw!"

Damaris was obviously not talking about Prince Britannicus, who had buried his face in a gold-fringed towel offered him by the ever-prepared Empress Agrippina. Serena followed Damaris' gaze and saw the excited Greek, Leander, in the crowd. He was cheering so loudly he caught the eyes of the imperial Family. The two empresses, Agrippina and the girl Octavia, had glanced his way. The older woman smiled sympathetically at his enthusiasm.

Serena studied the group on the *rostra* framed by the eagle-crested standards with their SPQR, symbolic of the power shared by the Senate and the Roman people. The imperial power was not mentioned or defined in that slogan, but everyone in the Forum felt its presence.

Tigellinus glanced over at the vestals. Serena could have sworn he winked. She looked away carefully, hoping no one guessed her awareness, or her alarm. But a second later, she knew someone had. The Emperor Nero. She wondered what he was thinking.

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During the next few weeks, thanks to her own hint and the good sense of the senior vestal, Serena was kept close within the confines of the Vestals' House and the little round temple on the Forum nearby. When messages came from the Palatine asking for the services of the Lady Serena, the older vestal carefully explained that Serena was ill at the moment, unable to comply with the gracious request. Lady Maxima set Serena to making modern copies of old scrolls concerning the history of the order and its vestals. Some papyrus was so worn and faded that it fell apart in her hands, and the ink proved illegible. At any other time Serena would have loved the work. Her copies were always neat and even, almost perfect. But at those other times her thoughts had not been tormented by curiosity about the world outside.

Sometimes during the winter the senior vestal put young Damaris to work in the tablinum beside her. It was a less successful partnership than either of the older women expected, however, and Serena could not help dreading Damaris' outside activities when the girl several times was sent out to take down wills and more than once asked permission to go and visit her sick Aunt Terentia Pella, who had fallen and broken her leg.

Serena had gained only one promise from Damaris, that the discontented young vestal would never again meet her cousin alone. The girl hesitated before agreeing, and Serena could only pray that she would keep that vow.

It took a severe argument with herself before Serena decided to share her worries with Lady Maxima. She was ashamed of her own treachery toward Damaris, who was her friend, but it had to be done. She was so anxious she forgot all the careful words of approach in the matter.

"Lady Maxima, I wish you would make a visit to the Lady Terentia Pella."

The senior vestal looked up from the bed of daffodils she was examining. She groaned and rubbed the small of her back.

"I thought I saw a green shoot coming up there. Ah! This back of mine. If I were only ten years younger. . . . What visit would you like me to make, Serena? Lady Terentia?"

The senior vestal was surprised. "I thought Damaris visited her. And then, isn't there a physician in the family? Terentia is younger than I am. Bones are sooner mended at her age. Besides, Damaris assures me that the family physician is very capable."

Serena took a deep breath. "He is very young as well. And very, very handsome."

Lady Maxima spent a few seconds connecting this with middle-aged Terentia Pella. Then her eyelids flickered. For an instant she looked frightened. She said resolutely, "I'll go on a little visit, as you say. Unexpectedly."

She was as good as her word. When she returned, she had a few quiet words of reproach for Serena.

"Dear child, I met Terentia Pella today. The things she told me about the kindness of our Damaris would surprise you. She hovers over her aunt, reads to her, runs errands, obliges in every way. And her visits are always welcome. As for the young physician—this Leander Pella—I saw them with my own eyes. They hadn't the slightest interest in each other. In fact, he criticized Damaris today for keeping her aunt walking in the peristyle when she should be resting. Believe me, Serena, I know how devoted you young vestals become to our virgin goddess. I'm sorry now that I overreacted when I saw that worldly prefect pursuing you. I should have placed more trust in your good judgment."

Guiltily, Serena avoided the vestal's eyes.

The vestal smiled, touched her shoulder. "Don't concern yourself. You were right to come to me about the Pella family. And I am right in telling you not to worry."

But it seemed to Serena that the vestals heard a great deal about the handsome young physician Leander Pella during the weeks following. It appeared that Leander's office in the Subura was crowded with patients. Damaris had heard about it from her uncle.

"The emperor's own mistress came yesterday," Damaris said one evening. "A freedwoman named Claudia Acté."

That interested Serena. "Really? A pretty, dark girl, terri-

bly in love with Nero—I mean the emperor?" So the devoted little Acté had won her prince! Serena, remembering the slave girl who had hovered around Nero on the night of the old emperor's death, asked, "Does she seem happy?"

Damaris shrugged. "How would I know except what my aunt and uncle tell me? On the rare times I am allowed to visit them. But princes, and people who live like princes, are always happy, I'm told."

"How did Acté happen to be in the Subura?"

But Damaris had lost interest in the emperor's mistress. She was in the midst of describing Leander's office, which she had seen, she assured Serena, in the company of her Aunt Terentia. "Acté broke a strap of her sandal and turned her ankle as she came out of some perfume shop. Anyway, Leander has . . . Why are you looking at me like that?"

Serena had dropped the delicate old papyrus she was working on. She remembered a perfume shop in the Subura. Locusta. Wasn't that the poisoner's name? And her guide, Loki, had said, "People from the palace come to her." Serena picked up the papyrus. "Nothing. Tell me what the city thinks of the new emperor."

But she already knew.

Serena's questions to those who went outside the Vestals' House, women like Lady Maxima, male servants like Loki, and even the old slave Hagar, had assured her that Rome was experiencing its greatest days since the early reign of the immortal Augustus sixty years ago. Thanks to the triumvirate of the old soldier Burrus, the philosopher Seneca, and their enthusiastic pupil, the Emperor Nero, delighted at his own popularity, the superb legal system which governed Rome was tempered by careful thought and a surprising clemency.

Serena knew Nero's mother had guided his life until it reached its present pinnacle, and she wondered that the Empress Agrippina could play so little a part in the new reign. She was not like the childish Empress Octavia, Nero's wife in name only. It was common gossip that Octavia did not wish to be seen with Nero except on the public occasions she couldn't avoid. She would share neither Nero's bed nor his company, and spent most of her time complaining that Nero had cheated her brother out of his rightful throne. As for Britannicus, he was subdued, letting his sister fight for him. Quiet and unambitious, he remained in seclusion and ap-

peared to like his life better than the pressures he had endured when he was considered heir to the enormous empire.

As far as Serena could tell, not a soul mourned old Claudius. Hard work and good intentions were not enough to win the plaudits of the fickle citizenry, it seemed.

Very carefully Serena avoided the subject of the prefect of police, but the Lady Maxima informed her that Philip Tigellinus, too, had risen in power. He was said to be at the right hand of the Empress Agrippina again. Would they resume their old love affair? But the Lady Maxima had heard nothing on that point. Serena thought often of the two of them, the empress and her friend Tigellinus, loyal through almost a score of years. They were free once more to love each other without risking death. She was glad of the hurt this knowledge gave her. Perhaps it would teach her a salutary lesson. Love and passion were not meant for her. She had a much better and more satisfactory world.

Meanwhile, Damaris continued to visit her aunt and uncle on occasion. Serena hadn't quite convinced herself of the girl's innocence, in spite of an ambivalent disgust at her own suspicions.

Twice in the late winter Serena made an excuse to visit the Pella mansion unexpectedly. On both occasions Damaris behaved with exemplary innocence, one time found busily polishing her aunt's collection of marble miniatures, the other time cataloguing her uncle's entire wall of books, with the papyrus scrolls and wax tablets placed carefully by subject.

It appeared that Damaris' visits to her relatives were a sincere effort to be of service. If she knew all the gossip about her cousin Leander Pella in his new office, it wasn't surprising. Many Romans, especially females, had begun to discuss him. Even the Palatine was said to be interested.

During the cold, wet winter nights, most of the vestals secretly disliked their turn at guarding the sacred flame in the Temple of the Hearth Goddess. Such duties usually didn't fall to the two senior vestals, the Lady Maxima and Serena. But there had been two weeks of sloppy, depressing weather, and everyone's patience was at an end.

Two of the vestals were ill with chills and fever, the Lady Maxima suffered from a recurrent toothache, and Damaris had won her plea to visit the mansion of Cousin Leander's richest patient, a widow close to the group around the imperial family. It seemed that the widow wanted to record her

will, just in case the dashing Leander failed in his effort to set a bone in her plump wrist.

Uneasily Serena hinted to Lady Maxima, "I suppose Damaris won't be going alone to this widow's house."

The senior vestal frowned. This was an implied criticism of her judgment, and from a young woman whose own conduct had not borne close examination. Furthermore, her mouth was full of steamy cloth and hot spices to ease the toothache. She said indistinctly, "We may trust the Lady Terentia, I hope. Damaris will accompany her."

Serena begged pardon, but her apology was brushed aside.

"So, my dear Serena, that leaves the temple to you tonight. The little novice, Clea, must be supervised by a woman of your experience. She is so young."

Serena liked nothing better than to keep as busy as possible during these long days and nights, a fact which Lady Maxima understood, though she seldom discussed it.

"Thank you, august lady. Now, you must rest. Are you sure you want no drugs for the pain?"

"I'll do very well, my dear." She made a face, which must have been a painful effort. Serena winced for her, clasped her hand briefly, and went off to find the fluttering, excited little eleven-year-old novice.

The two vestals shrouded themselves warmly in voluminous travel cloaks and set their sandaled feet in clogs that would get them over the torrents of rain running through the Forum to wash up against the steps of basilicas and temples like angry seas.

The night was more than usually dark. Even the storm lanterns in front of the Vestals' House had been doused by rain, but Serena would have known the short distance to the Temple of Vesta blindfolded, and little Clea followed after her, leaping from stone to stone. There were few loiterers in the Forum. Two of the uniformed *vigili* belonging to Philip Tigellinus' police had just put out a fire in the archives of the mint on the Capitoline Hill at the end of the Forum, and a drunken knight of the Equestrian Order staggered across the Forum leaning on the arm of his body servant, who carried a shaded lantern, but no one else seemed to be abroad.

Clea shivered and hunched farther into her big cloak, crying plaintively, "It's so dreadfully dark! Anybody could be hiding around here. They say the city's full of cutthroats."

"Take my hand. Don't look around. Take two steps," Ser-

ena ordered her calmly, although she understood the girl's fears very well. "Here you are, safe on the portico of the temple. You must not complain. Poor Lady Justitia has to be relieved. She has had a fever all day, and I've no doubt she is much worse off than we are."

Clea sniffed, wiped rainwater off her face, and complained, "Lady Justitia likes to suffer."

There was some truth to this, but Serena wasn't going to admit it. "Never mind that. Come along."

Lady Justitia's slave, an ancient Thracian forever at war with Serena's Hagar, snuffled out to the portico, demanding to know if her beloved lady was finally to be relieved. They all found the gaunt, hollow-eyed Justitia drooping tiredly in the cushioned cerulean chair provided for her.

"No, no, don't trouble," she insisted with a wan smile as Serena and the Thracian helped her to her feet. "I am perfectly well. I may be needed here tonight. I can stay."

"Don't be silly," Serena contradicted her, to the indignation of the lady's slave. To the Thracian Serena added, "Wrap her up securely, and don't let her get her feet wet."

The Thracian muttered, "As if I didn't know how to care for my lady!" She knew that Serena wouldn't report her impudence, and such mutterings acted as fuel to keep the aged woman going. "Here, my dove, my little one, come along. We'll soon have you in bed with hot wine in your stomach and hot stones on your feet."

"A little barley water will be sufficient. Please don't give anyone any trouble," the vestal protested in a voice fine as a silk thread.

Serena lent an arm until the feverish vestal reached the portico and then came back to install little Clea within sight of the flame at the center of the temple's circular atrium. The flame itself was protected by its temporary position in a marble receptacle suggested by Lady Maxima after a bad windstorm had nearly blown away the flame and with it, in superstition, the good fortune of Rome. Crouched in a dry robe, the eleven-year-old novice settled herself to watch the flame, while Serena, after making the ritual prayer to the hearth goddess, draped some fallen laurel around the aged white pillars.

Rain pelted the exterior of the temple, running in across the floor, and it soon became necessary to mop up rivulets with her sodden cloak. She was in the midst of this, kneeling

and working her way backward across the mosaics, when Clea called to her in a panic.

Wringing out the ends of the cloak, Serena got to her feet and made her way through the flickering lamplight, between the circle of pillars, to Clea. The child had made herself very small in the chair, hugging her knees to her chest. She looked scared, her eyes uneasy.

"My lady! I heard something. Like a foot. No. A boot crunching on the floor. Could it be . . . Vesta?"

Although Serena had a profound sympathy for the little girl assigned to her great task, she couldn't help laughing at this explanation.

"Vesta doesn't wear boots, dear, and even if she were coming down from Olympus to visit us, she is much too wise to pick a night like this."

Clea's eyes widened. She whispered, "That's sacrilege," but she hung onto Serena, barely peering over her arm as if she could make out phantoms in the great dark around them. Serena smoothed the girl's hair while she considered the scene that surrounded them on all sides. Her fears were more earthly. Until her experience with the two Praetorians the night of the old emperor's death, she would never have believed that she and her sisterhood could be endangered by any human being. Tonight it did occur to her that someone might have hidden in the temple, perhaps one or two of those rich senators' sons, the thrill seekers that Nero had run with as a youth.

There was nothing for it but to search the little temple, not too difficult a task in sunny daylight, but extremely unpleasant tonight.

She squared her shoulders, looked around for a weapon, and found it on the altar, a knife employed in the sacrifices to the goddess on the day of the Vestalia Holiday. She had never used a knife, even in sacrifice, and couldn't imagine herself plunging it into another human being, but on the other hand, she couldn't permit impious hands to be laid upon the eleven-year-old Clea. Maybe the sight of a tall vestal armed with a blade that shone evilly in the lamplight might give pause to any night marauders.

Clea squealed, "Oh, no! Not a dagger!" and covered her face. Serena took a long, deep breath. She would like very much to have copied Clea's gesture but had no one else to

lean upon; so she stalked slowly out into the dark beyond the inner pillars at the temple's heart.

The floors were wet. Tiles used to patch the ancient roof had blown off, and the temple's atmosphere was murky and damp. Hardly a tantalizing location for night revelers. She began to lose caution, to scorn her own childish fear of the dark. As she reached the north portico, the rain beating on the tiles overhead seemed to slacken. Small sounds became magnified in the silence. Either a telltale movement or some premonition of her own made her swing around, suddenly sure she was not alone in the narrow vestibule between the temple's interior and the outside portico.

This time she definitely heard the motion of a raised arm, caught the glint of steel, and screamed as she got the pillar between herself and that downward thrust of a legionary's short sword. A madman, she thought, frantically stabbing the air with her own sacrificial knife as the sword struck again, slashing through her sleeve and missing her by a thread. She must have screamed again as she dropped the knife.

Unexpected help came from the street—running footsteps attracted by her scream. And then the clatter of heavy steel blades at Serena's elbow brought the novice Clea to gasp out as Serena caught her, "They'll kill us!"

Serena assured her shakily, "Don't worry. I think they are city police." Her eyes had become used to the darkness. There was a single hint of light from the lamp wick floating in oil in the atrium. She made out the breast armor of the *vigili* attacking her assailant. They were probably the same two *vigili* who had returned from fighting a fire in the mint. While the three men scuffled, breathing hard and cursing, Serena realized a fourth man was present, silhouetted against the open street doors and making no move to help his men. He must have great confidence in their abilities against the madman, who kept muttering, "They must die! All vestals! The goddess made me lose at the Vestalia Races. . . . Every sesterce I owned. . . . All Vesta's fault!"

Clea whispered, "Is it all right? Can I go back?"

"Go quickly. No one is with the flame."

"Who was that man, my lady? Are we safe?"

"Go. The fire must never be left unguarded."

"Thank you." Gratefully Clea rushed back to the atrium. In the moment that Serena had turned and watched her leave, one of the *vigili* got behind the assassin and pressed the

flat of his sword against the assassin's throat. "I have him, Excellency."

The assassin's own sword hit the floor with a ringing noise.

"Make him talk." It was the voice of Philip Tigellinus. "Find out who sent him."

"I don't think he was sent," Serena put in, remembering the assassin's mad complaint that the goddess Vesta had caused him to lose everything at the chariot races.

The second of the *vigili* stepped aside. "I'm afraid he didn't parry my thrust, Excellency." At the same time, the assassin collapsed like a sack of chick-peas, held up only momentarily by the first *vigili*'s sword under his chin. Then his body fell in a bloody heap.

Serena clung to the nearest pillar. She felt sick at the suddenness and finality of the killing.

Tigellinus gave orders with a calm that only added horror to the scene.

"Well, then, get the body out of here and search him. Who was he? Above all, who sent him? Or was he simply mad?"

"Yes, Excellency."

While Serena watched, shocked into immobility, the men moved in silhouette, like demons in Black Tartarus, raising the body between them, the dead arms dragging. Philip picked up the assassin's dagger, threw it on the body, and said crisply, "Go on."

The two *vigili* stepped out into the Forum with their burden. Serena watched the rain glistening on their armor and padding on the cloaked body of the assassin.

She felt the prefect's arm like a strong band about her waist. "Here, here, don't faint, *carissima*. It's all over and done with."

"I never faint!" she told him indignantly, and to prove it, struggled to free herself from his powerful grip.

Her resistance aroused him, and his free hand felt for the nape of her neck under her disheveled hair. He forced her face around to his. His flesh was still wet and cold from the rain. But his rough mouth was warm. No man had kissed her before, yet it was exactly as she had imagined it, the heated contact of flesh on flesh which hinted of a greater heat in the union of their bodies.

The tender prelude, so unexpected in a ruthless man, trapped her. She tried to free herself, recalling her sacred surroundings, and the sacrilege of the feelings his close embrace

aroused. She found herself in a vise. Caught tight against the hardness of his body, with his lips fiercely drawing the breath from her, she panicked at her own response.

The gods be thanked for the frightened cries of young Clea in the atrium!

"Lady Serena! Where are you? Police are coming back. Should we get the senior vestal?"

Recalled to herself, Serena struck out at the prefect's face, and when he released her in his surprise, she ran from him—and from herself—to join Clea in the heart of the temple. Breathing a trifle more rapidly than usual, Tigellinus strolled after her as if such encounters were every-night occurrences in his life. They probably were, Serena thought, and tried to pull herself together as the *vigili* entered the temple again, this time with the senior vestal herself. The Lady Maxima's head was wrapped to protect her aching tooth, and she looked as if she had been aroused from sleep, but she managed to present her usual dignified appearance in spite of everything.

She heard the story, hoarsely and almost unintelligibly from Serena, with little additions by Clea, who heaped praise on Tigellinus and his men.

The Lady Maxima looked at Tigellinus for a long minute. His hard, dark gaze did not impress her.

"Excellency, is this true? Was the assassin a madman?"

Tigellinus waved to the *vigili*. A trifle surprised that his chief's word wasn't good enough, one of the police assured her, "August lady, we heard him say so. He'd lost all his money—property—at the Vestalia Races; so he blamed the holy goddess. There's witnesses."

Anxious that the Lady Maxima should believe the truth, Serena burst out, "I heard him. He wanted to kill Lady Clea and me because we serve Vesta."

One of the *vigili* added, "There are witnesses out in the Forum. A bit drunk, but they were at a tavern back of the Tullianum when they heard this legionary threatening the goddess, august ladies. Seems he wagered a piece of land he owned in Campania and lost it. So he headed for the temple. That's it."

The senior vestal was crisp and to the point. "I see. Then the matter is ended for the night."

Tigellinus smiled grimly, accepting dismissal and her

ingratitude over the rescue of her two vestals. He saluted the three females, motioned to his men, and left the temple.

"To tell the truth," Lady Maxima said in a low voice when Clea had gone back to her chair, "I thought at first that this was one of the prefect's tricks."

"Not this time. I heard the assassin myself. I saw that sword raised. I heard it cut through . . ." She hugged her arms, covering the torn sleeve.

"Can you keep the watch until morning?"

"Of course, my lady."

"A night we will all remember, my dear."

Serena laughed. The Lady Maxima had started out to the vestibule, where her maid waited. She stopped at that unexpected sound and looked back.

"You sound hysterical, Serena. Are you quite yourself?"

*I have never been more so. . . .* But Serena apologized. "I'm sorry. I suppose I am a little . . . nervous."

When the senior vestal had left her alone, Serena went slowly into the atrium to the vestal flame. Still hugging her arms, she prayed silently and urgently, "Gentle Goddess, help me to tear him from my heart. And my body."

Shortly after a murky sunrise the next day, as the law courts were opening, the halls of every basilica rang with demands that the Temple of Vesta, in the person of its sacred priestesses, must be better protected from desecration. Lady Maxima protested vainly that they needed no soldiers, that such a desecration occurred perhaps once in a century. Every night afterward for several months the delicate portico of the temple was cluttered with soldiers on guard, their language vulgar before her young vestals, their boots ruining the floor, and their curiosity about the sacred vestal rites almost a sacrilege in itself.

Late winter brought the first hint of senatorial rebellion against the new imperial policies which favored clemency, individual justice, and greater freedom of conduct, the latter particularly noticeable among artists in the theater.

During Senate hearings, senators Cato and Lentulus slashed away at the interference of imperial policies in senatorial provinces, and even the vestals heard a whisper of their discontent with the young emperor.

"Better that his mother, Agrippina, should have been Caesar," Lentulus grumbled one day. "She, at least, is a conservative. She always took senatorial advice."

This unwise opinion was promptly reported to the world by the *Acta Diurna*, the daily gossip boards posted in the old Forum. Everyone read these white boards and went off to spread the news to a neighbor.

"Mark me," Lady Maxima told Serena, "the Empress Agrippina will soon be in trouble if her friends don't stop pushing so hard."

Serena wondered. Perhaps Philip had persuaded Nero to forgive the tactless praise of his mother at his expense. Whatever the reason, the Empress Agrippina began to be the focal

point of conservative senators, while the populace of Rome continued to adore its hero, the young emperor.

Unlike the days of Caligula, and even Claudius, there were few reprisals for criticism these days. Anyone could speak his mind, the public noted vociferously, and no one was told to go home and slit his veins, as in the bad old days.

Lucky senators Lentulus and Cato, Serena thought, remembering their early and unfounded suspicions of Britannicus. Now, once again, they spread dissension and escaped. She watched their progress a little nervously.

During the last weeks of a wet and muggy winter, it was easy for Serena to avoid the residents of the Palatine and other public officials, and she knew as well as Lady Maxima did that she could not trust her own feelings. It was harder when spring came, a glorious spell of sun and cool breeze. She was expected to attend the gladiatorial games, the chariot races, and the theater, besides all religious ceremonies. She did so, but it was difficult not to look around, to see if the prefect of police was present. She withstood the temptation. The effort was obvious to Lady Maxima.

One morning after Serena had sat up late beside one of the physician Xenophen's aged patients, Hagar gave her some curious news, all the while vigorously brushing her hair, which had been confined in the precise vestal's coiffure for almost twenty-four hours.

"I saw the empress looking cross as two sticks yesterday. She was on the Via Lata consulting the bankers on her investments."

"I suppose she still thinks her brother should have been emperor," Serena observed.

"It was the real empress I saw. Agrippina. Not young Octavia."

"Was she alone? Agrippina, I mean."

Hagar looked at her sharply. "Alone if you leave off the six litter bearers and two slave women, and one of her gossipy friends."

"I mean—"

"I know what you meant, my lady."

Serena was afraid to dig further into this subject. She changed it quickly. "I suppose that child Octavia has grounds for complaint. I'd like to know what really happened between them on the night, or was it the next morning, that they

chose Nero as emperor? Ouch!" Hagar was pulling her hair in long silken strands.

"Well, well, indeed," Hagar muttered, giving Serena a yank with each "well." "Does anyone know what really happened after the emperor died that night? How came it to be the stepson and not the true blood son that's suddenly the new Caesar? Somebody must know. Somebody there that night."

*Someone like me*, Serena thought nervously. Had the Palatine forgotten her connection with the death of the old emperor? Or were they biding their time, waiting for a chance to keep her silent forever?

"Hagar, you know perfectly well you didn't want Britannicus. You told me in this very room that Nero ought to be Caesar."

"'Ought to be' and 'being' are two different things, my lady. I'm only asking why. Did the young emperor have anything to do with his stepfather's death? Or was it . . . ?" She hesitated, then plunged on. "Was it that prefect of police with the evil black eyes?"

"I suppose Nero was the chief beneficiary." Serena had been considering her own memories of the Emperor Claudius' last minutes, but Hagar's further remarks brought her to attention. Before she could object to Hagar's attack on Philip Tigellinus, the old woman advised, "My lady, you mustn't show your desires so easily. Not for your life's sake."

"What? You evil-minded old harridan! I said nothing."

"Your body betrays you, my lady. The look in your eyes, the flush that comes to your cheeks. And the tone of your voice. Be wary! We don't want others gossiping. We wouldn't want disgrace and the rest of it falling on you, would we?"

"What in the name of Tartarus are you hinting at?"

Hagar stopped brushing and stared at Serena, whose pale gold flesh, pulled tight over muscles and bone structure, had been too eloquent of tension.

"I'm hinting, august lady, at the penalty for a vestal who commits a sin of the flesh."

Serena straightened up, so angry—and frightened—she didn't even reach for a covering robe.

"Hagar, that is vile. How could you believe I would think of such a crime? Go away. Now!"

The old woman snorted, calmly took her brush, and left her mistress alone.

It was not bad enough that Hagar should know so much

about her. Serena was haunted by the thought that if the old slave who loved her had guessed so much, others with less affection for her might have equally sharp eyes. Nor was her conscience eased when Damaris and her body slave returned that afternoon, and reported to Lady Maxima in Serena's hearing.

"August lady, my aunt is a little better today. My cousin who is a physician prescribed the seeds of mustard with wine and the hair from a field mouse captured before the calends of March."

"And did this remarkable concoction work?" the senior vestal asked dryly. It was evident to the listening Serena that Lady Maxima had little faith in the prescription. "You are late. You were told to return by the ninth hour this afternoon. Tomorrow you will be attending the flame."

Damaris caught her breath audibly. "Excuse me. Tomorrow is a Race Day. The vestals attend the Circus Maximus. I had a bet on the Blue faction. My cousin Leander says the court always bets on the Blues, all but the emperor himself."

"That may be. I am sorry to penalize you for the compassion you show your aunt, a worthy lady, but other vestals have attended to your duties recently, and you must not expect them to do so forever. Now, go, child."

It was a subdued Damaris who answered respectfully, "As you say, august lady."

Damaris watched until the senior vestal had gone. Obviously disturbed, she turned to summon one of the slaves on duty at this hour of dusk, and saw Serena standing in the shadow of the tiled roof that surrounded the garden. The girl was so unnerved she gave a little scream, which she muffled hastily.

"You startled me, standing there like a white pillar in the dark. I thought you were a ghost."

"I'm not, you know. I'm very real, Damaris. I was real that day at your uncle's apartment. Remember?"

Damaris, who had relaxed, began to complain resentfully. "Oh, if you must scold, I might as well have my dinner and go off to bed." She yawned elaborately. "Anyway, you have an evil mind. Lady Maxima knows I am pure. Or do you censor minds now?"

Serena reminded herself honestly: The gods know my own mind has been filled with Philip Tigellinus, another forbidden subject....

The realization made her more generous to the younger vestal, for she was warning herself as well. "You can't continue to have these . . . desires. Think of the danger if anyone guessed your thoughts."

Damaris raised her chin, her eyes sparkling with anger. "I told you I don't see him alone." But as Serena gazed at her she threw off this defiant mood and whispered brokenly, "I'm so unhappy. You knew that all along, didn't you?"

"I suspected, *carissima*." Serena looked around. The garden and peristyle were silent, cold. The sky overhead showed no stars. There were no listeners. The chill of early spring had discouraged any of the goddess's employees who hoped to obtain some interesting gossip.

Damaris too looked around, then hurried into Serena's nearby bedchamber, followed by the older vestal. There was no door and no privacy. If rain and cold seeped in from the garden and the peristyle walk, Serena was expected to move to another of the small cubicles called sleeping chambers. The night was much too cold to entice eavesdroppers. Here Damaris made her pitiful complaint, and issued a warning of her own.

"Lady Serena, he scarcely looks at me when I don't smile. He said I was behaving like a marble statue. He said it makes me ugly. Why can't I at least smile or say a pleasant word, if others are with us?"

"My dear," Serena could only say, "look at your face in that silver mirror. It is as beautiful as ever. You mustn't mind what he says. He is angry because you are beautiful and he cannot have you; don't you see that?"

Damaris bit her lip, nodded, and then her volatile thoughts leaped to another matter. "There is something you should know, Serena. He said a strange thing to me. He blames you for my coldness to him—which is true, you must admit. And then he said, 'She need not be so high and mighty. She is tumbling to a great fall herself.' "

"What!"

Damaris said earnestly, "I know. I didn't understand it myself. I told him you were perfectly innocent of causing trouble between us. I said it was all my doing. My oath to the order, and all that. But something is going on. You have enemies. I thought you ought to know."

Serena felt her face drained of color, but she said stiffly, "Thank you. It was good of you."

"Not that anyone on the Palatine can find anything to use against you, dear Serena. You mustn't worry. Poor Leander was probably just making a threat because he . . . well, you know why."

All the same, long after Damaris had gone to her own quarters, Serena was left with the haunting fear that either Philip Tigellinus had talked about his feelings or she herself had given away some emotion to persons less trustworthy than Hagar.

The *Floralia* Races in May required every vestal but one to be present in their special box at the great *Circus Maximus*. Serena suggested that she might remain on duty at the temple in place of Damaris, but her motives were not entirely unselfish, as both she and the senior vestal were aware. In the end she was ordered to accompany the vestals, while Damaris and two house slaves, feeling much put upon, remained to attend the flame and drape the temple pillars with sacred laurel.

Fully a quarter of the city's one million population could, and often did, crowd into the circus for the races on each of Rome's hundred or so holidays. The betting was divided between teams which raced under one of four colors—Red, White, Green, and Blue. But the violent passions of the mob, including the Senate and court, were split between the Green, the faction of the people, and the Blue, which was the favorite of most patricians.

With the late-morning wind whipping the awnings overhead, Serena followed Lady Maxima into the stone enclosure, trying to hold her flying skirts and grateful for the customary confinement of her hair in six narrow vestal bands. Even so, strands of hair blew about her face in light, tawny wisps. Other vestals came pattering after Serena with little screams and embarrassed giggles, while the gathering crowd in the Circus got to its feet and hailed the white-clad vestals.

At the same time, the Emperor Nero and his party entered the circus, making their way down from the Palatine to the imperial box. Unfortunately, since their arrival coincided with the entrance of the vestals' few race enthusiasts noticed them, and the cheers they might have expected went to the vestals instead. The Lady Maxima nudged Serena.

"Don't look toward the imperial box."

It took enormous self-control not to.

"Why shouldn't I?"

"The prefect has just come in with Caesar and the Empress Agrippina and some other women. They looked this way. The emperor is laughing at something that sleek fellow Seneca said. Thanks be to the gods he wasn't angry because we received his cheers."

Cushions had been furnished for the vestals, and each woman's body servant arranged a cushion along the marble bench for her mistress. Serena was dying to glance up at the imperial box, but the Lady Maxima's impressive form now blocked her view. She knew she should be grateful but was torn by many feelings. Gratitude was not one of them.

"He looks different, doesn't he, my lady?" young Clea ventured, craning her neck to see behind and above Serena.

Serena didn't make the mistake of assuming the girl was describing Tigellinus. Sure enough, the girl went on.

"I saw Caesar when he was just a boy, only last year. He didn't want to be emperor. Remember? But I think he does this year."

Serena turned, saw the prefect of Rome standing beside the cushioned marble chair of the emperor. Others were talking to Nero, who leaned across the chair arm to speak with his mother. The prefect was the only one who looked elsewhere, out over the crowd, perhaps testing the attitude. He needn't have worried. Nero was exceedingly popular in spite of the bad timing of his entrance. He stopped talking with his mother in order to wave to enthusiasts who called out his name. He had never appeared happier. Over the breast of his toga with its elaborate Grecian folds, he wore a green stone at the end of a golden chain. The stone was so large that Serena remarked to Lady Maxima, "It can't be real."

"It is, my dear. An emerald. It seems to magnify objects. You know his nearsightedness. . . . I confess, I don't approve his placing his mistress so near him in the imperial box."

Lady Justitia reproved her superior in her sad, sighing voice, "We must pity the poor creature. She has not had our advantages, after all."

Clea burst out importantly, "Acté used to be a slave. The Empress Agrippina had her freed so she could win Nero over when Octavia behaved so badly. You can see he and Acté love each other. It's very romantic."

Serena watched curiously. She thought the shy little one-time slave girl handled her new position exceedingly well. She

sat behind the emperor and his mother. She was simply dressed in a Cathay silk gown with fluttering ribbons but no jewels, and looked like a shy, quiet child until Nero spoke to her, which was fairly often. He had become boisterous with power, and though he sometimes acted more childish than he had the year before, he was open and unpretentious, qualities the crowd loved. When he exchanged remarks with Acté, she blossomed and became beautiful. Serena gave him credit for seeing and appreciating this.

Senator Cato was also in the box near Agrippina, and scowling. Serena wondered if it was her own fancy that made her think he was uneasy, wanting very much to be elsewhere.

The Empress Agrippina turned her head. Elegantly coiffed as always, the dark auburn hair was threaded with amethysts and pearls. The empress curved her forefinger, summoning Philip to her. He moved from Nero's side to stand behind her, leaning over to hear what she had to say. Serena bit her lip at the sight of his tall figure hovering close enough for the empress to rest her jeweled hand on the back of his neck.

Painful as the sight might be, Serena kept staring until the senior vestal nudged her. "The emperor is looking our way. Smile."

Obediently, Serena forced her brightest smile, all teeth flashing. Nero half-rose in his seat, hailed the vestals, and called his prefect of police to do likewise. Tigellinus, who was still listening to an anecdote by Agrippina, nodded to Nero but didn't turn around, to the shock of the very correct patricians nearby. Nero laughed, apparently not offended, and shrugged his broad shoulders in pantomime of failure to the vestals.

Lady Justitia was puzzled. "What can all that mean? What is he trying to tell us?"

Clea giggled. "He likes us. But the prefect doesn't. Even if he did save our lives."

Lady Maxima and Serena exchanged looks. The older woman whispered, "I'm happy to see the prefect has gotten over his dangerous interest in you. I suppose he and Agrippina couldn't remain apart any longer. But I don't like Caesar's sense of humor. He seems bound to bring you together."

Pretending an indifference she was far from feeling, Serena made a diligent study of the racecourse. Luckily, the procession had begun to form, the trumpets bellowed, and the wide sanded track was alive with skittish teams and their small,

dangerous racing chariots, representing the four factions that were the chief subject of the wagers. The charioteers themselves, wearing somewhere on their bronzed bodies the color of their faction, stood rooted to the chariot cars, which rattled and bounced over the track of the long ellipse.

As the elaborate procession passed the imperial box, Nero got up, replied to their salute with an enthusiastic wave of his arm, and pantomimed riding a chariot, controlling his own four-horse team. Serena smiled. He hadn't changed so much, in spite of the honors and the powers heaped on him. He still dreamed of shining in the theater or the arena. Or here on history's greatest racecourse.

Tigellinus, the man who had already shown his talents on the course years before, paid little attention to the pomp and display below. He had straightened again, this time behind the empress, and was staring out over the crowd.

Clea cried, "How funny! The prefect isn't watching the track at all. I'll wager he's looking for that little red-faced man."

"What?" Serena turned. One person was missing from the imperial box. Senator Cato. Had he left without asking permission of the empress? It would be gross bad manners. Or was it simple fear?

The procession, with its images of the gods supporting the grandeur of the day's sponsors, was breaking up. The pageantry had ended, and the fretting, nervous teams lined up behind the starting rope, while the attendants tried vainly to hold and calm the horses. The chief sponsor of today's games was the emperor. Delighted with the attention of his huge audience—nearly a quarter of a million race enthusiasts, all silent and watching him—Nero dropped a gauze scarf in place of the napkin which usually signaled the start of the first race. There would be twenty-four races during the day, but aside from some tricky maneuver or a spectacular pileup, this was probably the greatest moment. A roar went up as he dropped the scarf, the rope fell, and the teams leaped forward, all trying for the choice inside spot close to the stone spina, the barrier that separated outward from homeward courses.

Serena heard the mutterings of the patricians behind the vestal box, and guessed why they were angry. Just as Nero had pleased the crowd by dropping a scarf of green gauze, he insulted most of the senators and other patricians who had

laid fantastic wagers on the Blue faction. Serena glanced around.

"He hasn't made himself any friends in the Senate today with that green scarf. They are sure to think the race is fixed."

"He hasn't made a friend of me either," the senior vestal muttered. "I have two hundred sesterces on the Blue today."

Minutes later it was with some amusement that Serena saw the Blue and the Green so busy fighting it out on the fourth of seven laps that the Red, a forgotten underdog on the outside track, made a sudden spurt forward, the all-important tracemate of his team charging across the path of the Green's right, and moving into the lead as the marble egg and dolphin dropped, one at either end of the spina, marking the fifth lap.

The Blue, leaning far out beyond the bouncing chariot car, urged his team on, to squeeze into a path perilously near the spina, thus getting the benefit of the shorter track and hoping to pass the flying four of the Red. He failed as the Green closed in, and the Red flew onward to an upset victory.

"Lost twenty on that one," the Lady Maxima confessed, and then cheered up. "However, I've got fifty on the Blue in the tenth race."

By the time the intermission for lunch had arrived, the senior vestal was gloomily calling upon holy Vesta to tell her if this had been an unlucky day for wagering.

"Not for the Green," Serena remarked as the imperial party, instead of remaining for lunch on its comfortable terrace among the stands, climbed up the aisle to the Palatine. Almost half the long ellipse of the circus had been built upon the flanks of the Palatine. Nero was in great spirits and motioned to the vestals. Smiling and nodding, they pretended not to understand him. The emperor shrugged, took the arm of the old soldier Burrus, and went on. Tigellinus was nowhere to be seen.

As Lady Maxima explained to Justitia, "Those Palatine luncheons can go beyond the proprieties."

The Lady Justitia agreed, but with a sigh for what might have been. "Of course, we must not. But it does seem a pity to offend him."

"Believe me, I know what I'm talking about."

No one doubted that.

Hagar and the other servants went to bring up luncheon

for the vestals. While they were gone, good-hearted religious men and women among the plebeians timidly offered the sisters pieces of their crusty round loaves of bread, cones full of greasy chick-peas cooked in braziers under the circus arcades, and assorted cakes and vinegary posca, the drink of the masses. Serena had learned to follow Lady Maxima's custom, accepting a few crumbs of bread, a date or several grapes, always returning the larger items, pomegranates, figs, goblets of wine, to the donor with thanks.

Someone tapped Serena's shoulder. Expecting Hagar, she saw a boy instead. "I have a message for the august Lady Serena." He lowered his voice. "From Senator Cato. He wants to meet you under the circus arcades near the Aventine entrance."

Serena was relieved to note that the Lady Maxima was commiserating with a patrician friend over the bad luck the Blue faction was having today. Serena got up as unobtrusively as possible, explaining to Clea, "I'm going to see what's delaying Hagar."

Clea said absently, "Yes, my lady." She was much too busy trying to catch one of the lottery tickets being shaken down from the wind-whipped awning overhead. Justitia had already received a ticket that entitled her to an amphora of Setinian wine. This, she virtuously announced, she would donate to the sick and diseased in the Temple of Ascalapius.

"As if we couldn't use it in our own temple," Clea complained, but Serena had already left the vestals' little marble terrace and was moving unobtrusively after the slave boy. It was less easy when she reached the steps and joined others hungrily plunging downward to buy food. Here they met crowds elbowing their way up with hands full of sausage, bread, and fruit, and posca dripping from every possible container. In spite of the pushing and shoving, Serena was grateful for the many togas in the mob. Most of these symbols of citizenship were yellowed with much cleaning, but even so, their presence made her own gown less conspicuous.

As she made her way down the steps, it occurred to her that this might be a trick of the prefect's, to see her alone. But her vanity could hardly go so far. He loved the Empress Agrippina and would always love her. He had shown no interest in Serena since that night in the Temple of Vesta when she struck him, and he had been more than indifferent today.

For which I must be grateful. I am grateful! she told herself firmly.

It was a relief to answer with her mind and not her feelings when she saw the little senator in the shadow of an arch just back of a brazier where sausage was sizzling on a grill above hot coals. The sausages were stale, and only the gods knew what meat besides pork they contained, but they smelled delicious. Serena's greeting was cut off by the senator's hasty motion to silence.

"Lady Serena, you were present on the Palatine the night the old emperor died so unexpectedly. And several of us suspected poison administered by the heir."

She was alarmed at his dangerous indiscretion. "Senator, I don't think we should discuss that night in such a public place."

He made no effort to look around for spies. The mob milling everywhere under the arcades would have told them nothing anyway. Nevertheless, he was discreet enough to keep his voice low.

"I have no choice. I confess we were wrong about that poor boy Britannicus, but our theory was correct. The heir to the Caesars committed patricide for the throne. We know where he obtained the poison."

"I don't believe it. Nero didn't want the throne that much."

He shrugged, stuck his stubby finger against her breast to punctuate his words. "How do we know what he wanted? I too was fooled at the proclamation. A committee of the Senate, including Lentulus and me, thought the substitution of Nero for Britannicus an excellent idea. Indeed, it was my friend Cornelius Lentulus who broached the idea that morning after the emperor's death."

"Who represented the Caesars at your conference?" she asked curiously.

"Seneca, of course, with Burrus representing the army. The Empress Agrippina and Prefect of Police Tigellinus were there. Burrus spoke frankly for the army. Said they loved Nero but would never give allegiance to Britannicus. Seneca spoke for the imperial family."

"The empress? And . . . and Tigellinus?"

"They said nothing. I've no doubt they would like to have seen Agrippina herself in power. The gods know she has the brain for it." He sighed. "If she were only a man, what an emperor she would make!"

Serena was relieved of one fear. Philip apparently had nothing to do with killing the old emperor to put Nero on the throne. She didn't believe that the young Nero she and the world knew a year ago would kill to gain this kind of power. But perhaps Seneca, or Burrus, acting, as they thought, in the best interests of Rome . . .

"Why did you call me away from the races? It will only attract attention."

"You are needed. To record a will."

"At this hour? Midday? Who is dying—or thinks he is?"

"Cornelius Lentulus. My friend."

Considering the recent trouble he had made for the emperor, this was so sinister that she caught her breath before asking, "How did it happen?"

"He and his wife were on the way to their villa near Naples, traveling in a horse-drawn carriage as they often do. The poor beasts were forced off the road by a cement cart pulled by oxen. The carriage and horses went down an embankment into the marshes. It was an hour before Cornelius could be extricated. His back was broken."

Serena winced. "And his wife?"

"Shaken up but not badly hurt. She acted commendably, had Cornelius brought to his mansion here in Rome. Cornelius told her he had two matters to clear up before the end. His will—he asked for you. And the matter of the old emperor's poisoning. His wife says he has guessed how it was done. He wants to tell me."

She hardly dared ask, "Do they know who drove the cement cart?" If this was murder, ordered by the emperor, there was deadly danger even to whisper such things.

"The cart rumbled away. No one could identify it. You know how many cement carts go in and out of Rome in a night. Meanwhile, Cornelius lies dying with a splinter of wood in his breast and his limbs paralyzed. He is being attended by a local young physician of the Esquiline district who seems to know his craft. But Lentulus must see you."

"I'm certain we have his will deposited in the Vestals' House with all our other legal papers."

"This is a new will."

Am I such a coward, she thought. . . . Am I trying to avoid the responsibility I swore to uphold? "Shall I order my litter? It will take time. And there are sure to be questions."

"No. I ordered mine brought around when I heard the news. It should be here any minute."

She almost preferred not to know the answer to the question she asked suddenly. "You said you knew where the poison was obtained?"

"From Locusta, a woman in the Subura."

"You forget one thing," she cut in triumphantly. "Claudius couldn't have been poisoned without the taster and the criminal Lycon showing at least some signs of illness."

Senator Cato hesitated. "Yes, my lady. Lentulus and I argued this out repeatedly. We couldn't get around it. But now he seems to have guessed the answer. On his deathbed, poor fellow."

Serena wondered if he understood the full significance of this discovery. She asked urgently, "Did anyone hear Senator Lentulus give his wife the message?"

He shrugged, looked around at the milling crowd. "Household slaves, perhaps. And the physician. Pardon, my lady. There is no time to lose. My litter has come." He signaled to the litter bearers, who had pushed their way into the street beyond the arcades.

"I'm sorry." She hurried out to the street with him. Even now they might be too late.

So many ways that the emperor and his obliging counselors could learn that their secret was known!

8

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The elegant patrician home of Lucius Cornelius Lentulus on the slope of the Esquiline Hill was in a state of quiet desolation, like its mistress. Lentulus' wife was a frail, lost-looking woman, still too shocked and perhaps too self-controlled for tears. Her left arm was bandaged. Her left cheek bore ugly red welts and scratches. She moved with difficulty and explained that she had "some slight problem" with her left ankle, but her only concern was for her husband.

When Serena tried to offer a word of sympathy to the Lady Aemilia Lentulus, she was gently silenced.

"There is only one person who matters. He has things on his mind. We must settle them. Come along. He will be relieved to see you."

Serena had no materials with her, no wax tablets or stylus, but Lentulus' wife put them into her hands as the two women passed from the chill marble atrium and entered the peristyle at the end of a passage. The injured man's couch had been placed here where it might feel the afternoon sun around the fringed ends of the awning. The wind had died down, but the awning still rippled pleasantly in a small breeze.

Serena's heart went out to the dying senator, whose sole concern in this terrible moment was the good of the state and the care of his wife. He attempted a smile at sight of his wife and the vestal. The fingers of his right hand fluttered a signal for the women to come close to his bed. His voice, always high-pitched, had been considered amusing in the Senate House, though it was always listened to. The courage in that voice now caught Serena, and it was Lady Aemilia who comforted her, squeezing her arm and whispering, "He understands."

Senator Lentulus asked, "Where are my manners, Lady Serena? I haven't offered you and my dear wife a chair. What are the servants thinking of?"

"My dearest," his wife explained, "we thought it best to exclude the servants while you have confidential matters to discuss."

"True. Is friend Cato waiting?"

"In the atrium, dearest."

"Excellent. Leander, more barley water." His head failed to move, but his long thin face was expressive, and Serena followed his side glance, which indicated the young physician Leander Pella. Damaris' yellow-haired cousin stood at the head of the couch. He surprised Serena by coming around the couch to greet her effusively, taking her hand and forearm as though she were a long-lost relative.

"August lady! Your arrival will make our dear Senator Lentulus well in no time."

Shocked at the absurd optimism of that diagnosis, Serena was relieved by the injured man's joking acceptance of it.

"Yes, yes. But all this isn't getting my barley water to me, dear fellow."

Taking the broad hint, Leander excused himself to the ladies and left, passing Senator Cato in the doorway. The senator looked after him, and when invited into the pleasant peristyle to hear the injured man's will, he remarked in low tones, "Does anyone know that young man?"

"He arrived last fall from Athens," Serena put in when Lentulus raised his eyes inquiringly to his wife, who hesitated.

Lady Aemilia explained to Senator Cato, "He is a connection of the Pellas'. You know, they are one of the oldest families in Rome."

"Ah! We may trust him. The Pellas have been of senatorial rank for generations."

The three of them nodded sagely. Watching them and having no reason whatever to suspect Leander Pella of any evil intent, Serena still marveled that so much trust was placed in the historic rank of the young man's family.

Lentulus coughed. The effort brought a froth of blood to his pale lips. His wife wiped it away.

"Don't strain to speak, dearest. We can hear if you whisper," she assured him. Cato and Serena hastened to agree.

Lentulus said, "Um. Just so," and cleared his throat carefully. "Now, then, put it . . . correct form, Lady Serena. My previous will gives . . . sequence of properties. All properties in Italy to my wife during her lifetime. My brother's son after. He is presently governor of Lusitania." Lentulus couldn't

go on for a minute. As his wife leaned over to help him, Leander Pella appeared suddenly in their midst, putting a goblet of a gray, watery solution of barley water to his mouth. He was able to take several sips before murmuring, "Enough . . . enough."

The young physician stepped back, the goblet in his hand colliding with Serena's arm. Her tablet clattered to the tile floor; the noise cutting through the injured man's body. Everyone felt his pain, but only his face registered the shock. Leander apologized profusely and returned the hinged tablet to Serena. Then he retreated beyond the awning so that they might complete their business in comparative privacy.

Lentulus dictated in quick spurts of energy: "The half my estates are outside Italy. Villa and financial investments in Massilia, which is on coastal Gaul. Land in Illyria and Hispania. These I leave in gratitude for his care of Rome . . . to Caesar."

Serena's hand paused over the tablet; then she hurried on, ignoring the sharp reaction of Senator Cato. The Lady Aemilia obviously was familiar with these clauses. She said calmly, "Yes, dearest. The residue of the estates to the Emperor Nero. And . . ."

Senator Cato muttered something, calling on the gods to witness either his amazement or disapproval, but Lentulus pretended not to hear him.

"And one hundred thousand sesterces to the Empress Julia Agrippina—"

"That's better," Cato interrupted.

"—for her Majesty's efforts in the defense of . . . senatorial prerogatives."

Serena thought she understood dimly what the dying man hoped to accomplish. He left half his estates to the Emperor Nero, whom he disliked and feared, hoping that his will would be upheld, because to attack it would postpone Caesar's own inheritance. It was a clever ploy in these circumstances, and not the first time it had been used, but Serena devoutly hoped it would not become contagious. Under a monster like Caligula it would be tempting to manufacture charges against a man like Lentulus. The sooner the charges were made, the sooner the inheritance was acquired.

Cato objected, "I don't know, my friend. It revolts me to reward a man who may have ordered this done to you. Remember, even if Nero is not directly responsible, I

wouldn't put anything beyond that friend out of Tartarus—the prefect of police. Or Burrus, or Seneca, when it comes to that."

"It protects . . . my wife . . ."

Lady Aemilia put her hand into his slack fingers. Cato shrugged and gave up. Serena understood how he felt. The cynicism of the will dismayed him as it dismayed Serena, yet she appreciated the dying man's motives.

There was a slight disturbance at the front of the building. Servants' voices spoke apparently to an unwanted visitor. Leander Pella and Serena stared at the atrium passage, but the senators were too much engrossed in a crucial subject to note the unexpected arrival.

"My friend," Cato hinted, "before you left for your villa yesterday, you and I spoke of the old emperor's poisoning. Do you still believe the slave woman Claudia Acté provided the poison that was used?"

The Lady Aemilia gestured toward the young physician.

"This boy . . . pardon, this good physician, Leander, told my husband and me that Claudia Acté is a customer familiar with the poisoner Locusta's stock. She pretends she is buying perfumes. But Leander saw her fingering a vial of something derived from plants. A poison. Isn't it so, young man?"

"Very true, gracious lady."

Senator Cato waved away all such speculation. "But we agreed, the only possible answer was poisonous mushrooms. Not some exotic substance that couldn't have been administered in front of the entire room."

The injured man became agitated, trying to contradict his old friend.

"That is my discovery! It came to me suddenly. Just before . . . the accident. I said to Aemilia, 'I know how it was done.'"

"Stop! The master is ill!"

The doorkeeper's agitated voice interrupted them, first in the atrium, then closer, in the passage. "You have no right!"

Philip Tigellinus nudged the doorkeeper aside and came striding out into the light of the peristyle, carrying his red-crested helmet under one arm. His thin red short cape half-concealed the helmet. In spite of his arrogant assurance, Serena thought he was more alert than ever. She wondered if he wasn't anxious as well. He saluted the senators, begged their pardon for the interruption, and explained, "I am sent

by their Majesties to wish you well, Senator. The empress herself has asked her favorite physician, Xenophen of Cos, to attend you. He should be here at any . . ." For the first time he saw Serena. He closed his eyes for a second, opened them, and saluted her coolly but correctly.

Serena was sure he hadn't arrived here in this imperious manner only to state the obvious. At the same time, she thought he had become angry at finding her here. She revised her first opinion. He was shocked. What did he intend, then? Her presence seemed to interfere with some plan or scheme he had been sent to carry out. She was sure of it when he appeared at a loss for words and lamely resorted to questions about the accident.

"You saw the driver of the cement cart, Senator? Or you, my lady? He must be dealt with. Caesar insists upon it."

"We saw nothing, Excellency." Lady Aemilia was firm. She pressed her husband's hand to calm him, but Leander Pella tried to raise the spirits of the little group.

"As soon as the senator is feeling more himself, Excellency, I'm certain the worthy Xenophen will operate to remove the splinter which has given the senator such discomfort. I'd be only too happy to assist. I am a great admirer of her Majesty's favorite physician. I studied his work on the island of Cos."

Everyone looked at him, surprised at his optimism. He was abashed by their stares, but nothing seemed to stop his chatter.

"Meanwhile, if you go about it very gently, Senator Cato, you may complete your business with my patient. But gently does it, I caution you."

Senator Cato was frigid to cover the general alarm in everyone but the prefect at this return to a highly secret conversation.

"I have forgotten what I was saying."

Leander was eager to help. "You said something about poison, Senator. And here is the prefect of police. The very man to advise you how to catch this poisoner." He sensed the stifening, the quick, panicked exchange of glances, and belatedly tried to save face for everyone. "Or was it . . . ? Stupid of me! You said that cement-cart driver deserved to be poisoned."

"Very true," Tigellinus snapped as if he believed this was the subject of the secret conversation. "And his Majesty in-

tends the fellow shall be found. We must make an example of him. . . . I hope the august Lady Serena is here only as a friend and not in her legal capacity."

With a strong effort Senator Lentulus answered him. "My . . . will, Excellency. Show . . . tablets to . . . the prefect, my lady."

She understood why and obeyed him, placing the tablets in Philip's reluctant hands. "Read!" she ordered him, looking up hard into his questioning eyes.

He hardly glanced at them. "This is not necessary. I see there is no business for me here. I beg your pardon for the intrusion." Again they were all startled. No one had ever heard the prefect of police apologize for his presence before, and they couldn't imagine why he had come here on some sinister mission and now retreated. He explained again, but no one quite believed him. "I had heard that the Lady Aemilia could identify the man who committed this outrage. In which case, my men would set out to locate him. There might be some damage to his cart. Or his team. Some evidence. . . . If you do recall anything we might use, Senator—or you, Lady Aemilia—please send for me at once."

His free hand returned the tablets to Serena. At that moment the injured man who had watched the prefect with suppressed emotion began to cough. Leander tried to offer him barley water, but he raised his weak hand, thrust it away so that it spilled over the physician's sandals. Then, with fingers curled, he seemed to beckon to his old friend Cato.

The stout little senator leaned over, expecting him to whisper some last farewell. Lentulus muttered hoarsely, "We asked how—you and I. And I discovered. You understand?"

After a few seconds Senator Cato said, "Yes, old friend. Take care. Don't try your strength. You understand me: *Take care.*"

Chilled and anxious, Serena knew Cato tried to warn him that the enemy was represented in their midst. She felt for the two senators, but she felt also for the man she dared not love. How must it feel to be so hated and feared? Would he understand that they were speaking of how the old emperor had been murdered, not how Lentulus had been attacked?

Lentulus raised his hand until it rested on the red-plumed crest of the prefect's helmet. His fingers seemed to play with the feathery brush that was so noticeable a sign of the prefect's rank.

"By this . . . means . . ." It was a mere whisper.

They were his last words. His wife, weeping silently, watched as life ebbed from him, though his eyes remained open until she closed them tenderly, then removed his hand from the red plumes and enfolded his fingers in her own. Obviously frightened and uncertain, Leander bent to examine his patient, shook his head.

"He is gone, my lady. He should not have made that last effort. The excitement was too much."

She nodded. They could now see all the anguish of the long vigil in her thin face.

Tigellinus shared the general shock, but Serena thought even the senator's death hadn't completely erased the prefect's curious and carefully contained anger.

Serena asked, "Is there anything we may do, my lady?" She was awkwardly aware that she and Philip were not wanted at such a time.

The widow turned to her. They embraced. Lady Aemilia said then, "No. Nothing but your prayers."

Philip touched Serena's shoulder. "We had better go. You have no escort?" She said nothing. She had seen Senator Cato staring at the prefect's helmet and knew what he suspected, that the dying man had indicated Philip murdered the old emperor. What else could Lentulus have intended when he touched that helmet, or at all events, the red-plumed crest?

Lady Aemilia ignored Philip, but she looked up gratefully at Serena. "You will see that his will is recorded in place of the old one? Thank you, my dear child. I hope you know that your presence eased his mind. Farewell."

Philip saluted the lady and Senator Cato, then hustled Serena out of the dead senator's house. In the street he seemed suddenly at a loss. By the local fountain at the corner Serena saw the chariot belonging to the prefect. His groom was walking the four horses, which had attracted every child in the neighborhood.

"I can hardly return to the Vestals' House in that," Serena reminded him. She was still shaken by the senator's accusation and his death.

"I hadn't expected to find you in that house." He thrust her, protesting, into an alley between the high, windowless wall of the Lentulus mansion and an expensive apartment building next door. "Wait here. I'm going to send to the Vestals' House for a litter."

She obeyed him, grateful that he at least had retained his common sense, which was more than she could say for herself. While he was gone, she tried to relive in her mind's eye the last minutes of Senator Lentulus. Had he actually pointed to Tigellinus as the emperor's murderer, or called attention to the helmet itself, for some reason which was only clear in his dying consciousness?

Tigellinus returned to her, still looking angry and disturbed. "Go home to your sisters, and this time, don't meddle in politics! I'm doing my damnedest to protect you, but you thwart me at every turn."

Bewildered and self-righteous, she said, "I go where I'm needed! I couldn't refuse a dying man's call to me. It was my duty to take down his will." She punctuated this by snapping closed the leaves of the wax tablet in her hands. He looked at her, what she thought of as his "policeman's look." She stared back, not permitting herself to flinch.

He yielded first, though with no hint of the consideration he had shown her in the past.

"I only meant that it is never wise to get involved with palace politics. Those two senators are flirting with crimes against the state. I don't want—"

"One of those two men is now dead. Very probably murdered." She hadn't meant to say it, but he goaded her by his cold-blooded acceptance of Lentulus' death.

He leaped onto her accusation immediately. "That's the danger. That sort of talk. How do you know what spies there are among the Lentulan slaves, or that young Greek physician, for instance? He's out to serve himself, as I well know. Anyone can see that. I can smell it in a man!"

He sounded utterly sincere. But if the palace was spying on senatorial homes, he must know it. She asked incredulously, "If he is a spy, won't he report to you? Aren't you Caesar's agent?"

"There is more than one power on the Palatine. Do you know nothing of power struggles? Caesar is not the only occupant of the palace. There is Agrippina. And the brother and sister, Octavia and Britannicus. Even Burrus and Seneca. And one of them may have decided already that your knowledge of the old emperor's death is dangerous. Now you complicate it by overhearing treasonous talk between two anti-imperial senators."

"What knowledge have I? Do you know of plots against

me? Tell them I know nothing, that you've discovered I am stupid and haven't listened to such talk."

"I've managed to upset one scheme. The trouble is, I don't know who is back of it. The fellow died under questioning."

She shuddered; yet she knew the cruelty he took for granted was just part of his world. His enemies, and hers, would torture them both if they could.

They heard a man and woman come out of the six-story apartment *insula* next door, arguing about the man's gaming losses. Philip moved to present his back to the street, effectively hiding Serena from the sight of the arguing pair as they passed.

Philip waited until they were gone. Even then he didn't move, and she shifted her weight nervously. For the first time in many weeks he looked down at her with something of the elusive tenderness that called up in her a quick response that she had to guard against revealing.

"Serena, if you were anything in the world but what you are, how we could have loved!" Before she could speak, he put his hand over her mouth. She felt the rough welts acquired during his long years with chariot lines, and her tongue tasted the salty leather lingering in his palm from the reins he had handled this afternoon. Over his hand her eyes must have looked frightened, though she wasn't aware of it.

"Don't be afraid, *carissima*. We can't always take what we'd give our souls to have. Because to take it would destroy you. Still . . ." He smiled. "I can dream about it. And do. More often than you would think. Next time you close your eyes in that cold, virginal bed of yours, dream of me assaulting your maidenhead. I assure you, I've dreamed of it often enough." She caught her breath. Her rapid pulse betrayed something of her own feelings, and she tried to avoid the close proximity of his body, and his all too perceptive eyes.

There was one escape for her senses, one way to cool her own ardor. She asked herself how many dozens of women, either slave or free, plebeian or patrician, he had made love to. He was too skilled against her own appalling lack of experience.

"All the same," he said, stepping aside and freeing her with a light, easy wave of the hand, "I've managed to relive that little kiss in Vesta's Temple until the dream is quite threadbare." He caught her hand again as she passed him. "You see, I keep pretending there was no interruption, that I took

what I wanted—and you wanted—that night. Now, don't flare up. I'm only teasing you."

Her voice wavered disastrously. "You wanted to add me to your collection of women, I suppose. Once with every woman in Rome!"

"No!" he shouted, caught a curious glance from a child running by after a hoop, and managed to regain his composure, if not his warm, teasing mood. He shook her wrist angrily. "You know better than that. If you were like the others to me, would I betray my duty? Would I stay away from you because I'm afraid for you? Use your head. Think." He gave her a little push. "Gods! If you weren't a vestal, I'd have made you my wife and, I've no doubt, quarreled with you every day since. Though not, I think, at night. . . . So it's hail and farewell, *carissima*, but not because I want it that way."

Her confused head told her one thing: she should be intensely relieved. Her body, and perhaps her heart, told her quite another story.

When the litter came and he helped her into it, she realized that a man had died within sight of her in the house of Lentulus, and she had scarcely thought of him during this last half-hour. She couldn't blame that on Philip, but on her own betraying body.

The bearers moved down the Esquiline Hill with her. She wanted to look back but didn't. She was also beginning to wonder who in the palace wanted her dead. She still did not know which of that lot had poisoned the old emperor, and ironically enough, she couldn't be certain who her enemy was—unless Lentulus had been right when he indicated the feathery red brush of the prefect's helmet.

9

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Serena had supposed on that May day of Senator Lentulus' death that Philip Tigellinus was trying to shock her with his fantasy of sexual moments between them. But during the weeks that followed, she understood, to her own humiliation, that she also was forced to such fantasies by her own needs.

It was always painful to attend public and imperial functions, where she was sure to see the prefect of Rome occupied with performing his own public duties. She avoided him whenever possible, then was perversely admonished by Lady Maxima.

"My dear, when the prefect of Rome looks at you, you must not turn away as if you found him a repulsive barbarian. He is, after all, the most important city official of the empire."

Exasperated at such a ridiculous misreading of her actions, Serena protested, "But, august lady, you yourself warned me about the danger of revealing any personal interest."

"Discretion, Serena, is always necessary in dealing with men of great power, no matter how lowly their origins may be."

"Should I smile when he looks at me? Or would that be indiscreet? Perhaps a smile with raised eyebrows."

Lady Maxima said, "Don't be flippant. There are smiles, and there are smiles. I see no harm in a discreet and impersonal smile. The man is attractive. Even a blind woman would feel that sinister charm of his, and it particularizes you too much if you are the only female in Rome who avoids looking at him."

"But you said . . ."

"Yes?"

This was not an argument Serena could possibly win; so she practiced the Lady Maxima's highly rated discretion, broke off, and went into the atrium to supervise the novice

whose turn it was to grind the day's coarse meal for bread. In this solemn room with its ring of marble chief vestals and its sacred hand mill, Serena looked around at the wall of red tabs, each marking a scroll that represented the will of a celebrated Roman citizen. Among the tabs was one for Lucius Cornelius Lentulus. In his last moments he had acted cleverly, for no one contested his will. Both Nero and his mother had expressed great astonishment at their own inheritance of which, as the Empress Agrippina's spokesman, Seneca, put it, "Her Majesty feels she is all undeserving, for it is her lifelong belief that no one should be rewarded for doing his duty."

Nero was not quite so ostentatiously modest. When he received the Lady Aemilia Lentulus in audience he told her that he had always known Lentulus was a good fellow, no matter what others might say!

It was hard for Serena to believe, upon those occasions when she met Nero, that he might be back of the murderous attack on Senator Lentulus, or that he wanted Serena herself out of the way because of her supposed knowledge. He was never overly polite to her, for which she was grateful. That alone would have put her stiffly on guard. But he seemed to do and say what he liked, to be exactly what he appeared to be. Even his remark to the Lady Aemilia, which produced uproarious laughter among the patrician Roman class, managed to say right out what others (his mother?) managed to hide pompously behind flowery phrases. When the emperor spoke to Serena, it was in the same friendly way he spoke to Seneca or Burrus, or Tigellinus. Almost, she thought, he trusted her. And so she continued to feel that if evil was being done in his name, he had not instigated it, though he would undoubtedly be willing to profit from it.

The Lady Maxima and Serena, accompanied by all the vestals not at their sacred duties, were present one day at the public tribute to Jupiter Optimus Maximus, the highest and greatest of the gods, where the mysterious rupture between Nero and his empress, Octavia, was revealed to all of Rome. On the wide steps leading up to the great white temple that crowned the Capitoline Hill and the old Forum deep beneath it, the whole of Rome saw young Octavia turn her ankle and fall against her husband. Nero's heavy, jeweled cloak and train over the dignified toga pointed up a plump look that he was beginning to acquire, and either the train or the

plumpness made his movements to reach her more clumsy than Serena had remembered. It might be the natural progression from the muscular youth she remembered before the death of the old emperor, but Serena wondered if anything else about him had changed.

Octavia's tense young face twisted with pain and something else. Was it fright? Serena wondered, as the girl jerked her arms free of her husband's helping hands. Breathless after his futile effort and the scuffle that followed, he stammered, "What happened? Can you stand? I only want to help you."

The four vestals clearly heard the girl's panicked reply: "You pushed me! Do you want to send me after my father? Nothing would make you happier than to see my brother and me dead."

Burrus, the soldier, hadn't the least idea what to do. Tigellinus stood at the stop of the steps scanning the great throng spread out below the steps, overflowing the Forum and the side of the Palatine. He started down to handle the situation—hardly a job for a policeman—but he was forestalled by the elegant figure of the Empress Agrippina. With the innocent, regal idea that she still ruled the empire, she had gone before her son in the procession, as was her custom. Now she came back down two steps and put out her hands, to which her daughter-in-law clung, while weeping as much over the "interference" of Nero as over the pain of her twisted ankle.

"I won't have him touch me. Please don't let him touch me."

Surprisingly enough, Agrippina comforted her with the promise, "No, my dear. He shall not." An assurance and sympathy which some patricians close by took to mean that she agreed with the girl's monstrous charges against Nero.

The two empresses went on into the temple together, leaving Nero awkwardly to face the stares of the crowd. He turned first to Seneca, then to Burrus for help, receiving only embarrassed gestures and silence.

"Why does she hate me so? I only tried to help her. . . ." In his mercurial way he had lashed himself from bewilderment to anger. "I ought to give her cause to know I'm her husband, her master! I ought to . . ."

Coming down the steps behind him, Philip touched his arm, said something to him. As Nero gulped down his emotions, Philip looked over at the vestals. His expression was

somber. He seemed to gaze directly at Serena. He didn't smile. Yet she read many things in his eyes, and tried to let him read as many emotions within the blank expression she kept for the world around her.

Nero raised his chin firmly, and throwing the jeweled train over his heavy shoulder, he went up the steps beside the tall figure of his prefect.

Old Hagar, who stood behind Serena and Damaris, whispered, "Heavens and earth, what a biting tongue the little empress has! Makes a person wonder if she's as mad as her brother."

"The Prince Britannicus is not mad. Don't be ridiculous. He is delicate and nervous, that's all."

Damaris put in, "Octavia thinks Nero killed their father somehow, in front of everyone at the dinner. Including you, Serena. Cousin Leander says so."

"No more such dangerous talk, all of you!" Lady Maxima ordered them, only to remark with equal indiscretion, "Besides, how could Nero kill the old emperor before so many witnesses?"

Serena no longer argued with those people who insisted that Nero had been ambitious to be the new Caesar. It was becoming all too evident that though his mother held formidable power, he was enjoying all the wealth, the trappings, and the acclaim of a Caesar.

In spite of the senior vestal's stern warning, Damaris went on talking, quoting her cousin Leander at great length. "He is often called to the Palatine nowadays. Almost as much as that tiresome old Xenophen."

But Serena's thoughts remained on the subject of the Emperor Claudius' death. Senator Cato had made an effort to speak to her at several public ceremonies, but he hadn't yet been able to show her any new evidence beyond Lentulus' dying words. These he repeated until she was heartily sick of them. Beyond their possible clue to Tigellinus they still made no sense. No one could yet explain how Claudius died, leaving those who ate from the same serving dishes alive and well.

Slightly in awe of the senior vestal's horrendous frown, Damaris lowered her bubbly young voice to a whisper. "Leander says the emperor's always been afraid of his mother. He says there's a new coin being minted with Agrip-

pina's profile first, where the ruler's profile should be. Imagine!"

Serena didn't doubt it. "Nero does all the work, and Agripina gets all the credit."

"Young ladies!"

No mistake in that tone. Serena and Damaris were silenced. Dutifully they followed Lady Maxima into the great temple.

Unfortunately, they had been overheard by Senator Cato, who put himself into line with the vestals as they were leaving after the sacrifices, and accused Serena of failing in her duty.

She bristled. "How so, Excellency?"

"You promised to get my committee evidence to work on. I needn't remind you of the subject."

His indiscretion was going beyond all bounds. The vestals had gossiped but never discussed imperial murder with outsiders, and by this time most of Rome was aware that Cato and a small, powerful clique of senators believed the Emperor Nero had poisoned his stepfather. It was hard to pin down just when and where the gossip had started to build on Senator Cato's early talk. Perhaps it was the death of Senator Lentulus which persuaded so many of the upper classes that the new emperor himself had ordered double murder committed. One of the infuriating things about the accusations, as far as Serena was concerned, had been the way more and more people drew back in distaste, or hatred, or simple terror when Philip Tigellinus came in their midst. Serena wondered if Philip knew that these senatorial cliques believed his hand had been used to murder Claudius and Senator Lentulus.

"I promised you nothing, Senator," she said crisply, drawing her fine-spun white cloak out of his pudgy fingers. He angered her because he made her nervous. He unnerved her because he reminded her of those senatorial suspicions. Not that she believed them! But such endless repetitions were bound to eat away anyone's faith . . . except mine, she insisted to herself. Aloud she reminded Cato, "I agreed to see if I could find evidence that Prince Britannicus had anything to do with the death of his father. I told you at the time your suspicions were absurd. Farewell, Senator."

"Lady Serena," he persisted, raising his voice against the noise of the departing worshipers around them. "My spies have contacted Locusta. She was here at the ceremonies today, and the prefect spoke to her. Something private." She

gave no sign of having understood him, and he went on, "You know her. The poisoner."

She stopped abruptly. What an incautious fool he was! His tongue wagged at both ends. Crowds pouring down the wide steps of the Capitoline Hill came between Serena and her sister vestals. Had any of them heard his talk?

"Please, Senator, I can't be seen alone with you. You know that. Let me pass." She moved to get around his short, rotund figure and collided some steps away with a red-haired woman of forty or so: Locusta, the sweet-faced, skilled creator of perfumes, medicines, and other products whose individual contents were unknown but their combination popularly believed to be lethal. Her warm, compassionate voice startled Serena.

"Forgive me, august lady. Did I hurt you?"

This question, coming so solicitously from a woman of Locusta's reputation, struck Serena as hysterically funny, but she managed to say, "Not at all. There was no harm. Thank you." She smiled because, for some obscure reason, she felt genuine feeling in the woman.

She had already taken another step down, seeing Lady Maxima motion to her from the bottom of the steps, when Locusta swung around and came after her.

"Lady Serena, they say you are different from the others. More worldly. In my shop I have excellent perfumes, and medicines. You often work with physicians. If you could visit my shop, you would be most interested, I promise you. And you could tell Xenophen and other physicians." Serena stared at her. Locusta lowered her gaze. She was agitated, anxious. "I would like to become known for . . . other things. Instead of perfumes, you understand. Would you . . . think about it? I could give you a very good bargain on mandragora, for instance. And even if you didn't buy anything, it wouldn't matter."

There was perspiration on her upper lip, and she flicked it off with her tongue.

*Very nervous, Serena thought, and wondered.*

"Perhaps, one day. Thanks. You are generous."

The woman blurted out suddenly, "No. I'm not. I'm only Locusta. I didn't mean to make everyone look at you."

Serena reassured her. "Let them look. We are out in the open air. What difference can it make?"

"But you see, I am . . . I must . . ."

Still behaving in an extraordinary manner, the woman went back up the steps toward the now empty temple without another word.

Senator Cato had watched this little scene with a kind of horror. He scuttled toward Serena now, but she ignored him. She felt a little sorry for Locusta, in spite of her unsavory trade, but Senator Cato always succeeded in annoying her.

"Lady Serena? You will be called to the Palatine soon. When you go, see if you can get the emperor to confide in you. He respects you. You may learn something to help us."

She pretended not to hear him. She went running down to join the other vestals, relieved to be safe among her sisters, away from conspiracies, plots, and poisoners.

Lady Maxima, who had stood too long during the Jupiter ceremonies, was tired and cross. She complained later, and in privacy, to Serena, "There are times like this when I wish we had kept the oriental idea of kneeling before our gods. Thanks to all that standing about, my back is one mass of aches and pains."

Wryly Serena suggested, "I should have taken Locusta's offer of a bargain in drugs."

Lady Maxima laughed. "Indeed, we may need her yet."

But this was only talk, a joke serving to remind Serena of Locusta's curious attempt at friendship, for which there had undoubtedly been some motive. In either case, it wouldn't involve Serena. Lady Maxima had made it a firm rule that she must no longer leave the house unless accompanied by her sister vestals.

And then it occurred to Serena that if she did have an enemy on the Palatine, that enemy might have tried to make a connection between the poisoner and the vestal Serena. A kind of preparation for future evidence against Serena. She remembered but did not dwell upon this sinister idea.

On one occasion in late fall the entire vestal household came down with chills, fever, and dysentery, which were blamed on polluted water from the only fountain that tradition permitted to those who served Vesta. Since everyone suffered, it hardly seemed to be an attack aimed at Serena. But the senior vestal persisted in believing her favorite vestal was in special danger, from a source somewhere within the imperial family.

The subject of Locusta had rapidly dissolved before more important events. Everyone, including the vestals, gossiped

about the Empress Agrippina's latest scandalous usurpation of her son's glory. She had herself proclaimed imperator, the commander of all Roman armies.

"Fortunately for the state, we are not currently at war with anyone except the Parthians. And one is always at war with them," Lady Maxima remarked.

Damaris said, "I wouldn't put it beyond her to lead the armies personally. It's just like her." She was prejudiced against the empress for personal reasons. It seemed that her cousin Leander talked about the great empress more than Damaris liked.

Serena's sympathies were divided between the imperial mother and son. She liked Nero better but feared him more. The threats against her own life seemed to come from that quarter, and who profited by the old emperor's death? Again, the new Emperor Nero.

On the late December day which opened the year's great Saturnalia holidays, no one could doubt the power of the Empress Agrippina. A "request" came to the House of Vesta to borrow one of their skilled vestals for imperial business, and it involved travel outside the city, not a task taken lightly by the sacred sisters.

The popular resort area of Baiae, south of the city of Rome, had suddenly become the temporary home of all imperial business, thanks to an unseasonal spell of sunny, dry weather, quite unlike the disagreeable fogs and rains which depressed Rome. The court had adjourned to villas on Baiae Bay and was constantly shifting between Agrippina's seaside estate and the elegant new villa being made presentable for the Emperor Nero. Trying to decide where their loyalty (and personal profit) lay, the courtiers were in a greater ferment than usual.

Leander Pella brought the verbal invitation to Serena, representing his newly acquired patient, Britannicus. As a male, he couldn't go beyond the atrium in the Vestals' House, where his presence made the shadowy recesses behind the marble statues come alive with vestals eager to catch a glimpse of their handsome visitor without committing the impropriety of being seen.

Leander made his request to the senior vestal, as was proper, and Lady Maxima gave her usual excuse, which she varied from time to time whenever someone from the Palatine wished to see Serena. Either Serena was ill as a result of

the bad water in the fountain which custom demanded that they use, or she had just been sent to Ostia to record the will of a wealthy shipowner.

She used the illness ploy with the young physician, who assured her that if the beautiful Lady Serena had the slightest difficulty he would be present with medicines to restore her. His ingratiating smile lighted the atrium's interior on this gloomy, gray day, as Damaris whispered to Serena. Both vestals were eavesdropping behind the statue of an early senior vestal whose empty eye sockets seemed to regard these young women with dignified disapproval.

"He's always careful not to let any gossip start about us," Damaris confided. "He knows I promised you never to see him alone, for instance. That's why he doesn't ask me to come now. Seeing me too much might cause talk, even though he is my cousin."

He was a picture of male beauty standing there with his golden hair twisted and curled by the fog outside and his nicely proportioned limbs outlined by the deep blue cape which he had wrapped as tight as possible around his body. He seldom wore his toga, thus following the habit of some modern young men, a habit heavily frowned on by the older members of the senatorial class but frequently supported by the emperor himself. Leander had already won over the Lady Maxima, Serena guessed.

"I am certain you would protect Lady Serena, young man, but I would prefer to send another vestal as her companion, as well as the Lady Serena's body slave."

Damaris held her breath while Cousin Leander hesitated. He said awkwardly, "And much as I would like that very thing, august lady, I am ordered to escort the Lady Serena alone. With her slave, of course. Her Majesty believes certain matters about the will should be kept confidential. She tells me it is the special request of Britannicus' sister, the young Empress Octavia."

Lady Maxima gave in. "Well . . . with two empresses present, and both in every way concerned with the properties, I suppose it can be done. But mind, young man, I will hold you responsible, and should any gossip arise, the Pontifex Maximus will hear the full details."

Leander bowed gracefully over her hand. He appeared relieved, but Serena, observing him, thought some of his ner-

vousness remained. Was this, then, so important a mission? And if so, why?

She and Damaris sneaked out into the peristyle, where they were surrounded by their other sisters, all buzzing enviously at Serena's good luck.

"Of course, they wouldn't let him choose me," Damaris explained. "It's the fault of the empresses. Probably think I am too young to travel so far. I saw the way young Octavia looked at me during the Augustan Festival. Disliked me from the very beginning."

Serena tried to change the subject. "These things are long, very boring. Sometimes it's difficult to write fast enough. They regard me as old and uninteresting, no threat to the young empress's beauty. And I can write rapidly."

"I suppose so." But Serena knew it had been a disappointment to Damaris. It was not big enough, however, for the girl to regard it as a rejection by her heretofore devoted cousin.

"I don't suppose they'll let you dine with them. You don't want to, do you, Serena?"

"I have memories of the last time I visited a dining hall with the imperial family."

As usual, she was torn by opposing emotions. She hoped there would be no likelihood of meeting the prefect of police. Life was a good deal less complicated when her thoughts and her dreams weren't full of him. Though he took care not to see her alone or to cause difficulties for her, he never let her forget, by his glance, the unusually gentle expression about his hard eyes, that his feeling for her hadn't changed. She sometimes thought her body was alive only when he looked at her, but those times were always in public.

"If I could take your place, go on a journey and leave Rome, Serena!" Damaris was pleading. "I'd chance dining with them. In my whole life I've never eaten at one of those elegant little tables while I lay on a couch beside a man."

"Take care!"

Young Clea passed them, returning from the atrium. She glanced curiously at the two vestals. "But that would be wicked, Lady Damaris. To lie with a man."

Damaris looked scared and made the mistake of clapping her hand over her mouth, which didn't help matters; so Serena explained, "We were speaking of books, Clea. This was a play by . . . by the poet Virgil."

Lady Maxima arrived with the palace order at that minute,

and Clea, innocently accepting the explanation, hurried away to her work. Nevertheless, Serena muttered, "I wish she had not heard. You must be careful, Damaris. These things are remembered. One never knows when they will be quoted, perhaps in innocence, to an enemy."

"I know. I'm sorry. I just can't control my tongue sometimes. Serena, I'm not a secretive person by nature."

It was very true, and Serena sympathized with her more than Damaris suspected; yet it was a fault that frank, honest Damaris had to overcome, for her own safety.

Serena was pleasantly excited by the preparations for her first journey out of the city. There were a few articles of clothing to be packed by Hagar in the small travel box belonging to Lady Maxima, a change of shifts and gowns, plus extra sandals with pure white lacing, and the ribbons for the ritual six plaits of her hair. An amphora of sacred water was provided for her from the well, so she would not have to commit the sacrilege of drinking plain piped water. Cakes had been baked ahead for her to eat in place of the bread provided at the imperial tables. Grooming facilities, except for hairbrushes and body oils, would be found as always in the private imperial baths.

Serena brought papyrus scrolls, wax tablets, and her favorite stylus. Justitia, the only vestal of Serena's height and weight, lent her a storm cloak of luxuriant white fur from beyond the wilds of Germania. Serena was touched by the gesture but terrified of wearing it for fear it might get stained or torn. Justitia was at once offended. Her thin face paled.

"However, if you don't feel that you care to wear a cloak which belonged to my mother, I shall understand perfectly."

After that, there was nothing for it but to hug the generous, sensitive vestal and assure her truthfully that the cloak would be guarded with the last drop of the wearer's blood.

"We may pray that it doesn't come to that," the Lady Maxima said dryly.

Leander, busy exchanging the greetings of the Pella family with his cousin Damaris, had one ear on this conversation. His violent reaction to the senior vestal's humorous remark surprised them all.

"Certainly there will be no bloodshed! That is understood, august ladies. Why should there be bloodshed on a simple two- or three-day journey?"

Everyone turned to stare at him. The Lady Maxima's remark was frigid. "Why, indeed, young man?"

He recovered his poise with difficulty and never did revert to the ingratiating charmer the young ladies admired. It seemed clear to Serena, as he helped her and Hagar into the curtained four-wheeled traveling carriage provided by order of the emperor, that Leander took his escort task very grimly. It would be interesting to know why.

# 10

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The carriage had a wooden roof, which, unfortunately, was warped. Serena and Hagar started out with an adventurous spirit in spite of the faint drip of moisture from the roof, and from which they had to rescue Lady Justitia's fur cloak several times. They were hardly outside the Porta Capena when the air became so thick with fog the four-horse team had to be led by two imperial grooms supervised by Leander, who likewise walked during the siege of bad weather. When Serena peered out, every funereal-looking tree that lined the Appian Way appeared to be beckoning to her like the spirits of her ancestors.

She turned to Hagar for comfort, but that gruff harbinger of doom snapped the curtains closed on her own side of the carriage and sniffed heavily.

"Must've been a place in the road like this where Senator Lentulus was pushed off."

Serena laughed because it was easier than confessing that this strange, misty, unseen world frightened her.

"You certainly have cheerful thoughts. Let's talk about something else. The empress's villa, for instance. Do you know anything about it?"

"What? Me? Twenty years ago they took me straight through this countryside without stopping, from Corinth and Brundisium to Capua and the slave market in Rome." Hagar grunted, changing her position and thinking back. "I was just as anxious to be sold as the slave dealer was to sell me. I never had been pretty, but even when I was ten I had a gift with my hands. I was a great success in the baths. Massage, hair design, anything with these hands. But there wasn't any future in Corinth, or even Athens. Rome! That's where I wanted to be."

Serena looked at her with interest, trying to concentrate on something that would take her mind off these uneasy mo-

ments of travel, her first departure from Rome since she had been brought to Italy and the attention of the good vestals.

"And you were bought by the senior vestal—the Lady Lucretia, wasn't it? A very mousy pink-and-white little lady. I remember her when I first came as a novice. I wasn't a bit in awe of her. I was much more frightened of her junior vestal, the Lady Maxima."

"She's a good sort, the august Lady Maxima. She knows a thing or two. The august Lady Lucretia never had a mind of her own. The pontifex maximus was with her when they bought me. He said the sisters should have a woman with good hands, that the gods wanted their servants—meaning you young ladies—beautiful all over. To be a beautiful vestal was a tribute to the gods. That's what he said. He was a terrible woman chaser."

"Not in the House of Vesta!" Serena reminded her sharply. The pontifex maximus might be the high priest of the vestals, and his power was enormous when the vestals fell from grace, which was seldom. But except for the unforgotten Julius Caesar, most high priests had been men of rectitude and faithful husbands. In public, at any rate.

Hagar squinted around at the interior of the carriage. There was a couch for her mistress, too short for Serena to stretch out her legs, while Hagar sat beside her comfortably enough on a stool that she had the foresight to cushion, and with her large, rough-skinned feet propped up at Serena's suggestion, on the travel box provided by the senior vestal. The carriage was illuminated by an oil lamp boat that swayed with the movements of the horses over the worn cobblestones, and Hagar had a practical interest in whether the lamp might tip over if the carriage wheels rolled into a rut.

After several hours of travel, with the metal of the wheels ringing and grating on the cobbles, Serena was dismayed to find herself with a headache. She prided herself on her general good health. Headaches were only for poor, invalidish creatures like frail Lady Justitia, and here she was, Serena the Unafraid, with a headache that threatened to split her skull, and a definite fear of her surroundings. Because she was so ashamed of her fear, she scoffed at herself aloud, as if to prevent Hagar from doing so.

"I do believe I'm afraid of all that darkness. Isn't that incredible? It reminds me of my childhood, before I left Gaul, the Druid Mysteries. Those gaunt, flat-topped monsters out

there are only trees. I know that. But I keep thinking they are coming nearer. They are going to reach out their tentacles and entwine my body and tighten . . . tighten, like a vise."

"It's not trees you're thinking of," Hagar muttered, plumping up a pillow behind herself.

Serena straightened up to attention, clutching her splitting head as she did so. "Now, what does that mean?"

"You know what it means, my lady."

Serena retreated in good order by changing the subject. "There must be something I can do for this head of mine. That horrible screech of the wheels is beyond endurance, I swear it!"

Hagar got up, lost her balance, and fell across Serena's legs before she got the curtains open on Serena's side and called to Leander. "You, there. Physician! My mistress needs you to open an amphora of water."

Hunched over so that his cloak hid his neck and cheeks from the weather, Leander stepped back to ask how he might assist the noble Lady Serena. Hagar repeated her demand and pointed to the tall amphora whose pointed bottom was anchored in the requisite hole of a thick slab of wood which lay behind the travel box.

Serena bestirred herself. As she did so, Leander saw that her hair had come loose from its confining ribbons. The long corn-silk strands framed her face in a luxuriant way that seemed to startle him. He couldn't take his eyes off her. She said, "No, please don't trouble about the water. Hagar, I don't dare put a wet cloth on my forehead. It will drip all over Lady Justitia's cloak . . . Leander, wasn't it planned that we stop for the night somewhere along the countryside?"

Hagar gasped. "You wouldn't stop at a public inn, my lady! It's unheard of."

To Serena's surprise, Leander agreed, with a distinct anxiety in his manner. "No, indeed, my lady. There is an imperial inn up ahead. Not too far. You'll be much more comfortable there."

"Imperial inn?" Not that she cared. Like most healthy people with an unexpected ailment, she couldn't cope with it. At the moment, the pain blinded her to all reasoning but her own.

Leander's blue eyes lighted. It wasn't often he could feel superior to knowledgeable patricians like Serena. "There is a vast difference, my lady. Consider an imperial messenger who

might have to bring news from the Parthian border, beyond Syria, even beyond the Euphrates. He needs food, bedding, a change of horses across half the world; yet he must make the journey in the shortest time. So the wise Emperor Augustus established stations from the very Gates of Hercules, the far side of Africa, all the way to Rome."

Her gaze narrowed. "And are we so important that we deserve imperial service tonight?"

"Naturally. Your journey is to oblige Prince Britannicus. After all, Lady Serena, if it hadn't been for the senatorial and Praetorian vote the morning after the old emperor died, Britannicus would be emperor today."

Still, she was puzzled that the young prince should wield such unexpected power, commanding imperial-service inns to treat her and her retinue like imperial messengers. In fact, she didn't believe it. Either Nero or Agrippina—or less likely, Tigellinus or Octavia—was the power back of her journey. If her growing suspicions were to be proved or disproved, she might find the first clue now. The test was: try to change Leander's travel plans.

"No. I'm sorry," she said with sudden firmness. "We must stop at the next inn. I can't go farther tonight. My head is bursting."

While Hagar stared at her, astounded, Leander agreed with surprising ease. "Yes, yes. I know just the inn. We should reach it long before dawn."

"Now!"

"But, my lady," Hagar reminded her, unused to this petulance, "this is the Campania. There are marshes hereabouts. And malaria. There are only a few wretched farms in the neighborhood."

"What about the nearest inn, the next we pass?" Through the lattice of her fingers, which covered her eyes, Serena watched Leander. The young Greek's face looked white and puffy in the foggy light.

"A cheap place. Serves nothing but vinegar-posca. The Praetorians go there to carouse. But some miles farther on is another inn. It has accommodations for imperial messengers, as I said. And I've arranged that your ladyship shall have the only private room all to yourself."

It wasn't a matter of comfort, Serena thought. He was scared. It scared him to stop at the wrong inn. She wondered why, then decided her imagination had been overactive. He

was very human and didn't want to come upon a cohort of drunken Praetorian guards. After her experience on the steps of the Palatine the night the old emperor died, she shared Leander's caution.

"Well, I suppose I can stand it until then," she agreed, and again found Leander's relieved reaction excessive.

"We'll hurry, my lady. I promise you." He wrinkled his nose at the thick overcast. "The fog seems to be thinning out. I'll mount up and get the grooms mounted."

This slight pause in the rattle of wheels had given Serena a false sense of well-being. Her head felt better, and she tried to tell herself there was nothing sinister in the young escort's behavior. She kept her head out, breathing the damp miasma of the countryside, and watched Leander climb up onto his horse with some difficulty. Serena had always been impressed by the ease with which soldiers like Tigellinus mastered the art of mounting one of the beasts, and even more complicated, remaining upright on the horse with little to hold onto but the light reins, and nothing to steady their high-sandaled feet but the horse's flanks.

When the little procession got under way, Serena remarked to Hagar, "He isn't a horseman. And he's certainly not the bravest man in the world. Why do you think he was chosen to escort us?"

Hagar was cynical but understanding. "He's got a pretty smile, and those two empresses are susceptible females."

There was a lurch forward that threw Serena and Hagar against each other. The wild screech of wheels over rough, gritty stone began again, and Serena remembered all her previous grievances and clutched her hammering head.

"Definitely the next inn! No farther tonight."

Hagar looked out, relayed the message to Leander, who nodded. The racketey trip went on for another hour, however. When the horses turned off the main road, which went on to the far-off Adriatic port of Brundisium, and they pulled up before an unimposing house of two stories, hidden from the thick, foggy light by unpruned plane trees, Serena wondered if Leander Pella had gotten his way, after all. Had they come to the very inn which expected him?

Before Leander could provide steps for their descent from the coffinlike carriage, Hagar got out her hairbrush and began to loosen that part of Serena's hair which had remained

in confinement. It flowed about her face, soft and ethereal in the pale light.

"Above all, my lady, we don't want loose talk about vestal virgins. You understand? You'll be plain Lady Serena, if that silly, pink-cheeked young rogue doesn't give you away."

Looking flushed and suitably pink-cheeked as he overheard this, Leander held up both hands to lift Serena down. He got his revenge by his reference to Hagar.

"The slave woman is right, Lady Serena. There won't be as much gossip about a simple patrician as there would be about a vestal."

"Anything to get away from the noise of those wheels!" she agreed indifferently, and felt his hands reach up beneath the rich fur cloak to tighten their hold around her slender torso. She was unexpectedly aroused by his touch, the closeness of him as he let her body in its light gown slide very slowly through his hands against his own, first her thighs and then her stomach and finally her breasts. It was a deliberate and tantalizing movement, calculated to arouse her, and managed to stiffen the pink aureoles of her breasts with an anticipation she had no intention of satisfying.

By the inn's single lantern she saw his bright, blue-eyed gaze fixed upon her bosom, which had betrayed her, and she thrust him away contemptuously. At the same time, she wondered if she could have overcome her body so easily if she had found herself in the arms of the prefect of Rome.

The innkeeper had heard the commotion of horses and carriage and came shuffling out to attend them. Serena noted that he was unshaven, not a good sign in an age where only the dregs of civilization—and Greek philosophers—failed to have themselves shaved with sharp blades and pincers every day. The innkeeper didn't seem to know Leander. Maybe her suspicions had been unjust, though this latest experience at his hands taught her just why his cousin Damaris found him so irresistible. He knew his way around females!

The innkeeper was gruff and totally lacking in enthusiasm. "We're not for the likes of the lady. Plain food and drink. A pallet to sleep on. That's it. Only plebeians here. Patricians goes elsewhere."

Putting on her best coaxing charm like a cloak, Serena said, "Oh, but there must be a room! A very small private room. Surely . . ." Her charm obviously didn't work. She

resorted to a more straightforward effort. "My . . . brother will pay you whatever you think it is worth for the night."

Grudgingly the fellow rubbed his bristling jaw. "There'll be my room. I've no objection to curling up downstairs before the fire, if you'll make it right with a few denarii."

The minute she entered the house, a place quite unlike anything she had seen since the blurred memories of the journey out of Gaul with her uncle and his military escort, Serena knew the innkeeper had been right. It was an unsavory hovel. Almost every house with which she was acquainted, except in the most wretched slums, had hypocausts, the method of carrying heat through pipes, and the food was generally palatable. Here the room stank of vomited sour posca, and the only heat was a meager fire of marsh twigs set in a scooped-out stone slab which served as the oven in the center of a kitchen/dining room/public sleeping room. Two carters were curled up asleep behind the stone oven, and a youngster in a blue tunic with deeper blue stripe down the open side lay asleep against the far wall. Probably he was a slave in some patrician household and was carrying messages between the city house and the family villa.

While Leander murmured apologetically, "I'll see that the grooms care for the horses," and backed out again, Hagar bustled over to the oven slab in the middle of the room, elbowing aside a curvaceous, sullen-looking brunette who was holding a fish speared on a long stick over the fire.

"Here, my lady. Come and warm your hands."

The comely brunette cook kept tight hold on the fish and went to squat in a corner by the boy wearing the blue tunic. Serena held her chilled fingers out over the smoky little fire, but she watched the cook wake the boy up. Then, together, they pulled the fish apart, eating the bits of meat, licking their fingers, and grinning at each other.

Serena whispered to Hagar, "It must taste better than it smells." She envied not the food but the fun the two youngsters had eating there in intimacy, despite all the others in the room. She envied the privacy of their lives.

"You are envying marriage, my lady," Hagar observed wisely. "It doesn't matter whether they've really taken vows or not. The union itself, even beyond the sensual things. Companionship and intimacy and maybe children. But their real lives aren't like that. There's poverty and cruelty and

desertion. I saw it all before the pontifex maximus and the Lady Lucretia bought me for the House of Vesta."

I wonder if she really does know what I am wishing, Serena thought. To be alone with Philip instead of surrounded by five other women and x numerous slaves. Alone with Philip. To watch his children and mine grow from babyhood to childhood to adulthood. Our children. But it would never be.

By the time she was permitted to leave the Vestal Order, she would be over thirty. People often died at thirty. By the time a woman was thirty, her daughter would be married and expecting her own children. Besides, Philip would hardly wait that long for her. Temptations were flaunted under his eyes every night, not to mention the greatest of all, the Empress Agrippina herself.

And I don't even really know that he loves me, she thought. Here I am thinking of him as my husband, the father of my children, and I don't even know, of a certainty, that he loves me.

By the time Leander hurried in from the bone-chilling marsh fog, the landlord had led Serena and Hagar up the stairs whose lack of railings made Hagar swear and mutter, "I hope the imperial villas are a little better, my lady."

Serena shushed her, but not before the brunette cook looked up, still chewing the skin of the fish. Leander caught up with her, chiding and apologizing at the same time. He made an effort to take her arm by reaching under the fur cloak, but Serena shrugged off his hand. Rebuffed, he reminded her, "If only I had been able to settle your ladyship more comfortably at the imperial posting house just a few miles farther! You, there . . ." This to the landlord. "I want your very best room for this lady."

The landlord favored him with a blank look from under heavy, overhanging brows. Serena reminded him hastily, "Thank you. But this is the *only* room. We are indebted to the innkeeper. He has been most kind." She didn't add that they were paying excessively for the room. The landlord gave her the same look he had given Leander. Impossible to read his expression, except that it was not friendly.

They were ushered into a dark hole under the broken tiles of the roof. A bit of rag burned in the oil of a lamp, and by this depressing glimmer of smoky light Serena and Hagar looked around. A thin pallet lay on the bare floor, and the

room otherwise afforded a tiny round table on which a half-empty goblet of posca was sitting. Several articles of clothing hung from wooden pegs in the wall. There was a small window opening covered by rough, heavy cloth which swayed faintly with the foggy air that crowded to get in.

Appalled by what he saw, Leander volunteered, "I'll have the cushions brought in from your carriage."

Secretly, Serena knew by this time that she had been wrong in insisting they stop here at this forsaken hole. Her opinionated behavior came from her mastery over all those addled young vestals. A faint throbbing across her forehead reminded her of that awful ride in the coffin-on-wheels. Maybe her opinionated behavior hadn't been entirely to blame for this stop. She remembered her headache all too well.

Hagar tried to wave her away while making up a comfortable bed for her on the floor, but Serena saw to it that two pallets were made up. Hagar refused to give in until it was agreed that only she should go down and arrange for some kind of hot food or drink.

"And don't you come down until we leave at dawn, my lady. I don't like the look of them down there. When I was bringing up your night things, I heard 'em talking about soldiers. After their duty on the Palatine is over at night, they sometimes ride out in the Campania. They stop by here and lie around drinking, assaulting girls like that creature downstairs."

"They have good taste. She is pretty."

"Don't be making jokes with old Hagar. You know I'm right."

Hagar was almost always right. It was her most maddening quality, but Serena listened to her and obeyed. This was a world Hagar knew much better than she did.

Hagar poured hot, watered wine for Serena, careful to use only the sacred water brought from the fountain in Rome, but the water could not cover the taste of the vinegary posca, the only kind the innkeeper professed to serve. There were hard cakes made in the religious way from grain prepared by the vestal on duty that day, Clea, and a stewed green vegetable looking rather like the local marsh grass which Serena poured over the cakes to soften them. Leander reappeared suddenly with grapes, which ended their late evening meal.

By the time they had finished the grapes and were remark-

ing that the room didn't seem quite so cold, the public room below became noisy with newcomers. Serena didn't need Hagar's reminder that the footsteps of several newcomers who clanked in together sounded very like the heavy-soled, thigh-high sandal boots worn by the Praetorian guard.

A voice came to the listeners, clearly a voice used to bellowing orders.

"Only one female, I see. The dark enchantress, Diana. Diana, girl, here's your great love. Come and make a man of me."

"And find something special for our new commander, Diana, *carissima*," another hearty male voice called.

More shouts and obscene suggestions from his friends faded as they trooped across the muddy ground to join their companions inside the main room.

"Swaggering bullies!" Leander muttered, having carefully raised one end of the curtain covering the window embrasure and studied the inn's newest patrons as they arrived. "I don't like it. They will make trouble if they know two females are up here. They seem to be celebrating something."

"I wish our two grooms were within reach of us," Serena suggested. "That would be three men against them. It might give them something to think about in case they . . . become a nuisance."

Leander peered out in a gingerly way. "Too far to call them. If I could get to them out in the sheds, I'd send one to the Taverna Marcipor. It's an imperial inn run by a good fellow who used to be a legionary. Marcipor has the mandate, signed by Burrus, the Praetorian prefect himself, to protect imperial messengers. He could send along some fellows with stout arms, and more important, the mandate of these Praetorians' own commander. It's disgrace or even death to ignore that."

Poor man, Serena thought. He looked nervous and shaken, as well he might. The responsibility was too much. If he were seen by the arrogant soldiers downstairs, there would probably be slurs, insults, maybe "playful" attacks upon this slender young civilian. Their sense of humor was rough on people they despised, and they despised everyone but themselves. Hadn't they already proved their power by choosing Claudius and helping to choose Nero for their emperor? No one had stopped them. It was a question whether the Senate or even the army legions could overrule them now.

"If you got out, could you get back into the room?"

He considered the foggy scene outside. "I could climb down that plane tree, and then get out. No trick to that, if no one saw me."

Hagar was examining the door. "Evidently the owner of this place feels the need to bolt himself in here when his customers get too rough. This bolt is pretty heavy."

Serena wondered if they were making too much of the Praetorians' arrival. All these plans for defense of two women's virtue might be absurdly elaborate. The soldiers didn't even know she and Hagar were in the house.

She started to say this to Leander and Hagar, but the slave woman held up a hand, silencing her. From the floor below came a roar of male laughter followed by the raucous taunt of the Praetorians' favorite, Diana. Obviously this was the buxom brunette who had been cooking fish when Serena's party arrived.

"You can't give me to any commander, my lad," she belied. "Not tonight. It's you I want, Lucius, you horny old goat!"

"But it's just to show how high we esteem our new commander. We give 'im you, you gorgeous gorgon."

"Gorgon! I'll gorgon you!" A certain amount of horseplay followed.

Hagar turned away from the door, looked at Leander and Serena. "Friend Diana may take care of all our Praetorians for us, eh, my lady?"

"I certainly hope so. What do you think?" Serena asked the physician, who was already measuring the distance to the ground below the window. She didn't ask him if he thought it might be sensible to take a chance and walk out through the public room. He had glanced at the door several times before sweeping his cloak tight around his legs, preparing to climb out the window. He turned, motioned Serena closer.

"My lady, be calm. Pay no attention to what goes on below the stairs. Keep the door bolted. I'll move one of the grooms close under this window. He can scramble up that tree and be here in no time if he hears a scream. I'm going to show the other one the shortcut across the hills to Marcipor's tavern. Then I'll be back. I'll stretch out for a while in the carriage, which is within sight of this window. Just inside that orchard at the end of the clearing."

"We understand. Thank you. Your cousin Damaris will be proud of you, Leander Pella."

He blushed, shrugged, and climbed out the window, groping for the heavier branches of the big flat-topped plane tree.

The two women waited uneasily for the next half-hour. Once they heard sounds like confused footsteps on the pebbles just below the window.

Hagar leaned out. "Must be the groom. He's curled up in his cape. Some people can sleep through anything."

The half-dozen Praetorians downstairs were singing a bawdy song now.

"At least, if they are down there, they aren't up here," Serena remarked as Hagar slipped the fragile white nighgown over her head. There was no use in waiting until Leander returned. He would be climbing into the carriage anyway. "I'm sure I wish I'd never gotten out of it," Serena muttered to herself as she wrapped herself in a blanket heavy with human-body odors and tried to sleep.

A short time later she and Hagar were aroused by the arrival of another horseman, who was greeted with loud shouts of exaggerated respect: "Hail, O mighty commander! All the world is yours—except glorious Diana. Enter. Enter."

After that, there were shouts, laughter, and a little while later, wagers on "Lucius" and "Glabrio" and the metallic clash of short swords somewhere in the night. Then came a sound far more ominous: the squeaking of the door latch as it was gently raised. The noise was repeated.

"That's too gentle a sound for an innocent man to make," Hagar whispered.

After a heart-stopping minute, during which their visitor gave one loud, angry tug at the latch, Serena felt she could breathe again. "He's going away."

Hagar went to listen at the door. "They're whispering."

Serena sat up. "Can you hear what any of them are saying?"

Hagar put her ear to the door. "They've gone. Two of them, I think."

"I'm going to dress. We may have to do some tree climbing ourselves. I wonder if Leander and the groom are awake." Serena was already reaching for her day gown. Her hair got in her way, and she brushed it aside hastily. Would there be time to have it neatly braided and in place before she reached a proper inn? It would be a sacrilege and a dis-

grace for a vestal to be seen in public with her hair loose and hanging below her shoulders like any street wanton.

Hagar said, "I'll see if I can rouse the groom without those soldiers hearing. That other fellow who went off to Marcus' tavern or whatever it is, he should be back in another hour or two. Maybe the soldiers will all be in a drunken stupor by then. I'm sure I hope so." She reached the window, and it was as if the curtain itself came alive before her in two huge, knotty hands. With the curtain torn away the entire window space was filled by a hulking soldier, a Praetorian who had removed his shiny metal breastplate but looked no less terrifying.

"Now, now, ladies," he advised them running his tongue over his heavy lips as if he tasted his pleasure in advance. "Don't scream. There's enough for both of you. Gods in Tartarus! There's enough of me alone for both of you, as you'll find."

# 11

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In her wild panic Serena shot a glance at the door. She had a momentary idea of rushing out and announcing her identity, threatening this fellow's comrades with a horrible death if they violated a vestal. But already someone was rattling the door latch, and voices called out, "Open up, Glabrio, damn you! Diana's described the female. Don't keep her to yourself."

Serena leaped for the plate of grape stems, intending to hurl it in the big moon face of the intruder, Glabrio. At the same time, Hagar threw herself at him, crying, "Touch my lady, and I'll kill you!" as her fingernails gouged at his face.

From across the room Serena ran to help her, but before she reached the huge, grinning soldier he had cuffed Hagar hard under the chin. Hagar crumpled up, falling back against Serena, who dropped to her knees with the old woman, screaming, "You've killed her!" She drew Hagar's head to her, whispering, trying to rouse her. The old woman was breathing with a stentorous snoring sound, but at all events, she was alive.

Glabrio laughed. "That's the spirit, girl. But don't worry about the old woman. She's just been knocked out. Meanwhile, you're going to entertain our commander, the new Praetorian prefect." He lifted Serena up from the floor, ignoring her screams and deftly eluding her bare feet, which kicked back, trying to hit him in the groin, the way one of Xenophen's patients had boasted of doing long ago. Her elbows were more successful. He grunted, coughed, and dragged her to the door, still struggling frantically.

Carrying Serena under his arm, he shot back the bolt of the door with his free hand. She tried vainly to free herself, screamed, "Sacrileg!" hoping against hope that at least one of his companions out on the stairs retained some glimmerings of religious feeling.

Afterward, these minutes blurred as if she had experienced them in a nightmare, but during the endless seconds her horror and shock were masked by fury. Indignation. Didn't they know the penalty? But of course, they didn't know who she was. Like these men, she could be executed for this assault. In her confusion, she still didn't announce her identity. She only fought.

When the door opened, she twisted out of Glabrio's grasp, only to have him seize her gown, ripping the side seam of the pure white cloth from beneath her arm to the hem. The young Praetorians who waited on the landing were stupefied by what they could see of her pale, flawless body, the rib cage pulsating as she breathed hard, the lovely curve of the upper thigh and the shadow of golden pubic hair, the long leg thrust forward as she tried to preserve her balance.

One of the young soldiers slowly put out his hand, as if he could not believe what he saw. Her loosened tawny hair and the ruined gown still covered her breasts, and his hand touched the lengthy strand of her hair gently, brushing it aside. His hand cupped her breast. For a few seconds, breathless and only half-conscious, she made no effort to repulse him. He was sweating, and her captor, Glabrio, grinned. In a low voice he warned him, "That's enough, lad. She's for the commander first. A little gift to win over the old boy. Afterward . . . well, depends on him."

Serena swayed dizzily, trying to make out the scene before her: the landing, the stairs, two Praetorians on the lower floor, sprawled out in a drunken sleep with Niobe comfortably curled up between them. The messenger boy in the blue tunic was gone.

There were voices from another room, the sound of a heavy goblet clashing against an amphora, and the landlord's voice, "You'll find this better than posca, Excellency. To celebrate your Excellency's new command." They had come into the room below and were approaching the stairs. "Highest post in the empire, Excellency. That deserves the best."

Serena pulled away from the wide-eyed young soldier, thrust her elbow at the other two, and rushed to the stairs. The old Praetorian prefect had been bluff, honest Burrus, who reared Nero. He would never permit the assault of a vestal. She didn't know who the new Praetorian prefect might be, but he was her only hope. She got halfway down the

stairs when Glabrio grabbed her arms so hard they were nearly pulled out of their sockets. Her ear-piercing shriek was muffled as he lifted her high in the air, into his arms, bellowing, "How's this for our gift to our new commander? Take her, Commander. And thank us."

The new Praetorian prefect had come into view at the foot of the stairs with a big goblet in his hand, the landlord just behind him, carrying a large wine amphora.

The new Praetorian prefect said indifferently, "Later. Later. What is all the racketing around? You act like new recruits."

Glabrio held Serena out. She reached down blindly in his arms, pleading with the prefect, still too dazed to see him. "Help me . . . Help me . . . Sacrilege . . ."

She heard the goblet flung back against the landlord's big wine jar and the horrendous crash as the amphora cracked and its contents poured out on the rushes of the floor to complete the stench that shrouded the room. Then she heard the prefect's voice again: "Let her go! Now! You hear me? Now!"

She knew that voice. It was Philip Tigellinus who saw her like this, half-naked and in the hands of these human animals.

Better to die than let him see her brought to such degradation. She tried again to free herself. The younger Praetorians, amazed by the suddenly serious pall that had fallen over their joking game, took her from Glabrio's arms. She shrank from them, backing against the stair wall. In spite of the curtain of disheveled hair over her face and shoulders, she knew Philip had recognized her. She had never known such shame before. But something in her long training, her pride as one of the six chosen vestals of Rome, would not let her hide her half-naked body when he looked at her with that horror she would never forget. She remained against the wall, unmoving, the marble statue of a perfectly formed creature, cold and inhuman.

The young Praetorians hurried down the stairs past Serena, past Glabrio, past their new commanding officer, with gaze lowered, recognizing something that terrified them in Tigellinus' voice.

Glabrio began, "Look, Commander. Take a good look." He was hesitant, and puzzled, but still convinced that once Tigellinus saw the value of the gift he was offering there

would be congratulations, not insults. "See the merchandise, and nobody the wiser. The escort is gone. The groom who was guarding the window is dead. I saw to that. When the others come back, she'll keep quiet. Nobody would believe her. Who's going to charge the Praetorian guard? They won't dare. She'll keep quiet, all right."

Tigellinus moved up the first stair. His face was set and colorless. There was no sign of emotion. Even the black depths of his eyes gave no warning to Glabrio, who reached out, boasting. "Ever see anything like this?"

He got a handful of Serena's torn gown. Before he could jerk it off her shoulders, the short sword in Philip's hand caught the flickering lamplight. Glabrio dropped his own hand to his short sword, backing up two steps, showing his teeth.

"If you want a little swordplay to whet your sluggish appetite, I'm your man. I've already carved a piece out of Lucius' hide tonight."

One of the younger Praetorians came quietly back to the stairs and touched Serena's hand. She snatched it away, but he threw off his mud-splashed travel cape and offered it to her as Tigellinus stalked his prey past her up the stairs. Serena nodded faintly to the young guard, wrapped herself in his cape with fingers that shook. As Tigellinus passed her, she murmured huskily, "I wasn't hurt. Philip, take care. He is very strong."

She couldn't tell whether he had heard her or not. His thick, heavy blade rang a second later as it clashed across Glabrio's sword. Serena made her way down to the bottom of the stairs, hearing behind her Glabrio's labored breathing, the scuffle of the two men's sandals, and above all the fury of the force behind their thrust and parry. They used their swords as if they were daggers, with short stabbing and ripping motions.

The boy who had lent her his cape held her up with his arm around her in a gingerly way. Everyone was awake now, gaping at what clearly seemed to be a grudge fight. While Diana and the landlord cleaned up the spilled wine, looking around often at the fight, Diana's two sleeping companions, who had begun by shouting wagers, became silent, struck by the blood already shed, for a gash had opened up Tigellinus' lower arm from his wrist nearly to his elbow, and Glabrio

was in a worse fix. Tigellinus' sword slashed across his face like a scythe cutting down grain.

During the time his killing blade appeared everywhere before Glabrio's eyes, he had not uttered a word. The huge Praetorian, without the will to murder, tired first. He was in retreat now, backing up a stair each time he tried to evade that slashing, stabbing blade.

Tigellinus' hand and sword hilt were now soaked, sticky with the blood of his arm wound, and Serena mumbled desperate prayers for his safety. But Glabrio appeared to be failing. He could scarcely see. The cut over both his eyes had opened up. He blinked, fumbled, went on the defensive, a position obviously foreign to him.

Breathing with an effort, he called out, "Don't want to kill my . . . commanding officer. What say . . . call it quits?" He barely got the last word out. The Praetorian prefect's sword, wielded like a knife, shaved his cheek, drew back across the flesh of his shoulder. Ducking aside, he lunged at Tigellinus, missed him by a hair, reached out for the support of a nonexistent stair rail.

As they all stared, the huge Praetorian tumbled off the top step and out into space, to land on the floor below with a sickening, bone-crunching finality.

Everyone but Philip and Serena ran to examine the body. The Praetorian prefect waited until the landlord looked up from Glabrio's body.

"Excellency, he is dead."

The Praetorian called Lucius showed Philip two sharp pieces of crockery. "Looks like he hit his head on these, Excellency."

Philip spoke for the first time since he had challenged the dead man. His voice was quiet. Its cold indifference caught even Serena, who was shivering uncontrollably in the young Praetorian's cape.

"Take him back to your barracks outside Rome. Choose your own time for the funeral. Meanwhile, I'll report his death to the emperor."

Lucius spoke for his shocked fellow guards. "Excellency, excuse me. . . . What's to be done about the woman? Nobody harmed her. We were saving her for you. But who will keep her quiet?"

Philip came down the stairs slowly, examining his sword. He passed the blade across the rushes of the floor. When he

looked up, each of the guards was at the door. Two of them picked up the dead man by shoulders and feet. Philip said, "I'll make your apologies to the lady. If a word of the affair leaves this room, the empress will be given your names, all of them, within a matter of hours. . . . That applies to you as well," he warned the landlord and Diana, who were back on their knees, cleaning the floor.

The two nodded, looking scared, though hardly more uneasy than the Praetorians, who tumbled over each other getting out with their burden, while the last and youngest guard called to Serena, "You can have the cape with my compliments, my lady. Sorry we were so rough. It . . . it was all in fun." Then he too was gone.

Philip turned to Serena. He seemed about to take her in his arms. Remembering the two witnesses, she held him off with one trembling cold hand while the other kept the cape tight-closed around her.

"Hagar . . . my maid—he struck her. She is unconscious."

He ignored her hand that warded him off and drew her to him with his free arm.

"Can you get up the stairs?"

"Yes, yes. Your arm!"

"Never mind that. It won't be the first time."

The landlord got to his feet, timidly handed Tigellinus a clean cloth which he had been about to use on the floor. Trying to control the weakness of her hands, Serena managed to tie the clumsy bit of cloth around his lower arm while he watched her under his dark brows.

"It will serve. Never mind that," Philip said impatiently.  
"Are you all right? Are you sure?"

She tried to say nonchalantly, "They saved me for you."

He didn't seem to notice the significance of this. She supposed he must still be under the keen, nervous spell of that deadly duel. They went up the stairs together, with his left arm half-supporting her, although she was rapidly regaining her usual spirits, and by the time they reached the room in which they could hear Hagar groaning, she assured him in a more formal manner, "I can never in my life thank you enough, Excellency, for what you did tonight. Never!"

This time, as he opened the door, he did smile. "I was Philip a few minutes ago. Now I am 'Excellency' again."

It was enough to tell her that he too had recovered from that violent, killing rage of his.

"Gods! They put you in here? The place is a dungeon. Where is this Hagar?"

"In the corner. He knocked her down." She pushed ahead of him, rushed to kneel beside the heavy-breathing old woman.

He ordered sharply, "Don't move her yet. There may be a head injury."

Before she could stop him, he had taken over the situation, examining Hagar's head with a care and tenderness quite unlike the Philip Tigellinus she had known.

"She seems to have been hit under the chin by his fist. Knocked out, in fact."

Hagar's eyes opened. Through dry lips she challenged him gruffly, "You and your soldier friends!"

He grinned. "Not my friends, old woman. They were imperial guards. Praetorians. Not legionary soldiers. There's a difference."

"Hagar, don't let him fool you," Serena teased, delighted that her beloved old friend was herself again. "His Excellency has been made commander of those Praetorian guards. But he saved us. He was heroic."

"Or jealous," Philip muttered.

Serena pretended not to hear this. "Now, Hagar, where does it hurt? How are you feeling?"

"Cold! Never been so cold. Jaw hurts, and my chin's swelled up, but otherwise . . ." Hagar turned quickly, clutching at Serena's hand. "No harm to you, my lady? They didn't find out who you were?"

"The gods be thanked, no."

Philip assured her, "They know what will happen to them if they spread the story. And even so, they know Serena only as a patrician lady."

"The august Lady Serena."

"Sorry. The august . . . No matter. You are still shivering, old woman. I'll take you downstairs to the fire."

"Yes. The fire."

He lifted Hagar up off the floor, and she stared over his arm at Serena. "He is very strong. No wonder he won against them all."

Philip reminded her, "I am their commander now. The title itself carries a certain strength." He pointed Hagar's bare feet toward the open door, and Serena followed him out, still engulfed in the Praetorian's cape.

Diana hurried around making a comfortable pallet for the old slave woman and gave her a brick wrapped in hot cloth to keep her warm.

"She's very healthy," Serena said. "She should be ready to travel by tomorrow. How I hate this place! I must go and dress."

"We should be traveling within an hour. Two at the longest."

"We can't! She won't be ready. Even I . . ." Serena broke off. He was right, of course. She was still shaken by the mauling she had received, and most of all by the shameful memory of all those men staring at her half-naked body, a body no man had ever seen before. But she was resilient by nature, and as she started toward the stairs again to dress, she firmly blotted out the picture of all that had happened on those stairs tonight.

Philip asked, "What in the gods' names happened to the rest of your escort?"

"Leander was going to show the way to the next inn. I have an idea he went the entire distance himself."

"Sounds like something that wily Greek would do. I'll see if he is anywhere around the place. . . . You really are all right?"

She laughed. "Yes. For the dozenth time. I am all right." Then she ran upstairs, clutching the cape to her as if she half-expected to find those lascivious guards pursuing her. What would have happened without Philip? How could she live her life out as a vestal after this? Philip had preserved her own right to give herself to whom she pleased. No gift except the first gift of life seemed to her as great as the gift he had given her. She remembered now that during one of those awful nightmare minutes in the arms of Glabrio she had regretted one thing. If this body devoted to Vesta must be violated, it should have been entered not by these animal creatures but by the man she loved.

In the room she had shared with Hagar she stooped over to pick up some of their articles of clothing and property, but the effort, after her exertions, made her dizzy, and she knelt there on the floor, letting the cape fall back upon her shoulders as she held her head.

Vaguely she was aware of running steps, up the stairs, across the landing. A soldier's boots. She raised her head in

terror, saw the new Praetorian prefect, and knew such relief she could barely whisper his name.... "Philip."

She saw the concern in his eyes as he pushed the door closed behind him and came to her, lifting her to her feet before him with one strong, gentle hand.

The feelings of great joy which gripped her whenever she saw him were mingled now with a dread of that very weakness in herself. She might love him in her thoughts, might dream of what could have been if she were free of her vows, but her vows remained spoken.

The beloved goddess must be watching, perhaps testing her. She felt that all her vestal years were a preparation to strengthen her against temptations of the flesh.

"Help me," she begged him, trying to free herself without stirring him to violence. But Philip held her before him, staring at her as the Praetorian's cape fell away.

"*Carissima . . .*" When he called her by this tender name, she felt all her resolution failing and tried not to listen or think of his words, sincere enough but insidious.

"Do you think I would hurt you?" he asked softly. "Look at me. I know you want me. As I want you. I can feel it. Your dear, lovely eyes—they tell me. I can free you of your vows. Nero has the power. He will find a way to free you."

He still didn't understand that not even Nero could free her from herself, her sacred, silent service to Vesta.

She recognized the desire in his eyes as he studied her, running his uninjured hand over her body from the curve of her shoulder to her hips, and her knees trembled with the tension of all that had happened; yet she no longer felt the cold of the room.

"*Carissima*, I want you for my wife. Don't you understand?"

She stared at him, her eyes misting at this dream that she too had shared for many months. A dream that was forbidden by her most sacred vows.

His hand was rough and warm. Its touch enticed and wooed her. When he ripped away what was left of the torn gown, she strained away from him, terrified that her moral weakness would betray her. She felt him draw her body to his with one powerful arm, and in a panic she struggled to free herself. To yield willingly would be the greatest sin she could commit.

But his lips touched the flesh between her breasts, and his bloodstained hand now lowered her to the floor. Pressing with

all the strength in her arms, she tried to hold him off, praying for the power to withstand this assault upon her senses.

She felt his lips upon the soft, warm, secret places of her body and could no longer think of sin and punishment, but felt this was how life was meant to be. The heat of his body warmed her and his experienced hands and lips brought her to a peak of desire that matched his. When he entered her and their bodies were one, she even welcomed the pain. She raised her arms that shone gold in the faint lamplight and locked them around his neck, fastening her fingers like a greedy wanton in the wiry, graying black hair at the nape of his neck.

He whispered words to her that she did not understand as his lips again took her own. She felt that she was dying, all life and breath drawn from her, and still she clung to him at his command. If she died, she wanted to die a part of him, with his arms and his powerful thighs imprisoning her.

Gradually the memory of the present took over. She drew away from him, her wide eyes staring at him, seeing him in a daze. With passion spent, he took her face gently between his hands.

"Don't be frightened, *carissima*. Your goddess must have brought me here to save you. We'll sacrifice to her tomorrow, my love."

To save me for what? she thought. . . . For this sin with you?

He was reaching for the Praetorian's cape. He wrapped her in it, lingering to enjoy the sight of her body.

"*Carissima*, my little love, do you know how long I've wanted you? Do you remember the Vesta ceremonies three years ago? I wanted you then, long before you even knew I existed."

How wrong you are! she thought tenderly and sadly. . . . I have always known. From the moment you returned to Rome after your long exile with Agrippina. I was afraid of you, your power, your eyes, your reputation for cruelty and ruthlessness, because I was afraid of my own weakness. Afraid of how important you would be to me sexually. But I did know your attraction, even then. . . . And my solemn vows. I knew I must wait until the long years of my service to Vesta were ended. Thirty years old. Who would want me then?

The goddess Vesta had brought him to save her, but not

for their happiness. Vesta had accepted her vows, fed, clothed, given her a pure and noble life for the betterment of Rome. In a few exquisitely painful, glorious moments she had broken those vows, which were the only stern payment demanded by the goddess for all the good that had been given to her by Rome.

His voice was harsh with emotion. "Don't look at me like that."

"How?"

"Thoughtful. As if you wondered at the future."

"I don't wonder," she murmured softly, trying to let him understand without saying it in words. "I don't wonder. I know what must be."

"I'll get you out of Italy. Somewhere outside of Roman jurisdiction. I want to take the marriage vows with you. The emperor will help us." His smile was hesitant, not like himself. He was unsure of her. It made her love him more, and it became harder to destroy what he was building in the aftermath of their sexual experience.

She moved her fingers slowly over his as they enclosed her face while he explained to her something this cynical and cruel police official seemed never to have said before. "I want our children to be recognized by law. The gods blast the Caesars! We will found our own dynasty."

"Philip . . ." she began. He kissed her lips. She wanted to go on in this euphoria forever, but she saw the white gown of her sacred office appearing to float in the lamplight behind him. She had left the gown there two hours before, hanging from a peg. It was like the ghost of the goddess, reproaching, reminding. Beckoning to her. She knew she must persist. "No! Listen to me. Philip, you ask me to take vows with you. Do you expect me to keep them?"

She felt his surprise. "Of course. You could never play me false. Not you."

"Yet I gave my oath first to the goddess. Until I am released, I must serve her."

He was shaken by this, and then she saw his growing anger. "Until you are released? Five years? More? You must be mad. Do you think you and I will wait years before we love like this again? We may both be dead by then!"

"My love, not that long, surely." She tried to be patient with him, but he refused to understand. His first frustrated anger turned to something else she could not quite read in his

face. The light of a fierce determination. He hadn't come this far in his life from the lowliest Sicilian horse dealer to the Praetorian prefect of Rome by admitting failure. She began to withdraw from his arms, afraid of that determination to conquer all things, even the woman he professed to love.

He let her go, slowly but with a slight air of bravado. He was very much the commander as he promised her, "You will take the vows with me, Serena. No one else must be the mother of my children. But you are ignorant of life. You need more experience, more knowledge of love. You will have it, I promise you."

She let him raise her to her feet again. The physical part of her longed to kiss his hands, which had saved her for him. But the white gown of the vestals hung there behind his dark head like a pall, warning her of the sin she had already committed. She could say nothing, merely shake her head and watch as he left her alone in the little room.

"Mighty Vesta, mother of Rome, help me," she prayed, and fancied she saw the cold, marble eyes of the goddess shaming her for her betrayal.

# 12

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Leander Pella, arriving an hour later with five tough ex-seamen employed by the Taverna Marcipor, found that the boy he had left under the window had been murdered and removed, and the new Praetorian prefect, whom he didn't trust at all, was in charge of the party to Baiae. The Lady Serena was curiously reticent around Tigellinus, while the Praetorian himself seemed very much at ease, almost to the point of a joking familiarity with the vestal and her maid. Especially her maid.

Leander was puzzled but knew his duty and tried to reassure Serena, who was superintending the bestowal of Hagar onto the couch in the carriage.

"Lady Serena, I just wanted you to know you will be quite safe under my care during the rest of the journey."

She tried hard not to show her real reaction to this, but the sardonic quality escaped in her voice. "That is good to know. I am obliged to you."

"I mean . . ." He looked around, lowered his naturally gentle voice. "You mustn't be afraid of the prefect. He won't dare to hurt you while my men and I are with you. The empress would hunt him down and have him crucified."

It seemed odd that Agrippina should be so concerned for Serena's life and honor. She remarked, "I had no idea she was so religious. Is it the sacrilege she would object to?"

"No. You see, she feels that there may be danger to you from . . . other quarters." He leaned closer and whispered, "The death of the late emperor—people won't stop talking about it. And the person who gave the order for his death might feel you are a threat. You know. You were a witness when he died."

"Not when he died," she reminded him sharply. "Both the prefect of police and the empress assured us all that the emperor was not dead. It was announced that he died in the night. Just whom does Agrippina suspect?"

"Whom does it profit most? That's the question the two empresses ask each other. They are afraid for you; so they made certain that if trouble arose on the journey, there would be stout-armed men at Marcipor's place."

"How odd that they didn't send them to escort me from Rome!"

"Because . . ." He looked over his shoulder. "It was Nero who named this fellow to the most powerful office in the empire, so Tigellinus is now bound to be on the emperor's side. Agrippina—her gracious Majesty—didn't want Nero or Tigellinus to know about your trip until you reached safety in the imperial villa. And an armed escort plus myself and the grooms was bound to arouse gossip at the Porta Capena when you left the city. As it was, Tigellinus didn't expect to find you here, and so he hadn't time to do you harm."

"He only had time to save me from harm."

Leander agreed without turning a hair. "A clever move."

She pushed a cushion behind Hagar's head. The old woman was cranky, didn't want the attention, demanded to know if Serena realized she was behaving like a Byzantine slave, but Serena could tell that she was still badly shaken by their recent experience and her fight was all in words, not actions.

*She is shaken, Serena thought wryly. . . . I am the one whose world was really shaken. I should be shamed, guilt-ridden, but I am not. I love him, and if I had not made those solemn vows to Vesta, I would be his mistress and wife today.*

For hours now she had tried to reason herself into a deep sense of her crime, but she knew that last night between them had been as nature intended. Their bodies matched and suited each other as the sword suited its scabbard. But to go on as his mistress, she would become no more than one of the harlots in the Subura. So it must never happen again until she was free.

Philip's attitude baffled her. It was as if he refused to believe that last night could not be repeated. She wanted to avoid the warm, possessive look he gave her as he lifted her up into the carriage. She steeled herself not to let her flesh react to the ease with which he held her, or the memory it aroused of his hands as they explored and excited her body last night. This would be a test, and she passed it. Her body reacted, but her will prevailed. She thanked him as she would have thanked Leander, and the journey resumed.

This time, in spite of the young physician's maneuvers, it was the prefect who rode beside the carriage, holding the reins of his mount in his left hand and looking even more imposing than she remembered in his new Praetorian helmet and red cloak. The thought brought to mind something Leander had said. Philip must now have shifted his allegiance from Agrippina to Nero. She was sorry for that. Since Nero's accession, in spite of all the good he had done, all the positive and democratic legislation he had sponsored, she couldn't help suspecting that he was back of his stepfather's poisoning, if poison it was.

And what of dying Lentulus? Aside from an obvious accusation against Tigellinus when he indicated the prefect's helmet—or the brush on it—what else could Lentulus have meant? Was Philip Tigellinus the man who killed the old emperor in order to bring Nero to the throne? She didn't see how this could have been so, when only minutes after Lentulus' accusation, Philip was flirting with Serena. No agitation against Lentulus. No anger or fear. He hadn't even recognized what that gesture indicated. Surely a guilty man would have done so!

"He couldn't have done it. Nobody could be such a consummate actor."

"Done what? Are we going to the theater?" Hagar muttered sleepily.

All the same, Serena thought, it didn't really rule out the possibility that Nero was behind the original murder, and possibly Lentulus' murder as well. The gods knew the young emperor would have other hirelings besides the obvious choice, his prefect of police.

Aloud she said, "No, Hagar. No theater today. Go to sleep. The sun has come out. It's quite warm."

"He's not what I thought he was. He's quite the gentleman. Different from that dark, forbidding fellow he used to be at the ceremonies," Hagar murmured, and closed her eyes again. Serena pretended she did not know what the old woman was talking about. She didn't feel that she was yet able to discuss Tigellinus dispassionately.

There were no more unchaperoned hours, for which Serena was grateful. When she answered that look in Philip's eyes, which seemed at once mocking, amused, and full of promise, she tried to tell him without words: "Patience and time. One day I can love you, but not while I wear these robes."

Sometimes during midday rests while she and Hagar and Leander and Philip ate picnic lunches together on some grassy slope, the prefect made them all laugh with stories of his early days, and none laughed harder than Hagar, though she remarked later to Serena, "Poor fellow. Only an uneducated freedman would tell tales like that one about the mare and the charioteer in the presence of a lady."

It was these occasions, and when he took up a ten-year-old country urchin walking his way to the next town and let the boy guide the reins of his big black stallion, that Serena thought: What a husband and father he would make! He reared Nero as a boy. He talks to children as equals. I have seen him exhibit humor and tenderness and strength. To Hagar as well as to me. And he is the lover I would choose in all the world.

But as Philip himself said, would he even be alive when she was free of her vows? His was a hazardous profession in an exceedingly hazardous world, the world of the imperial court. And as for Serena herself, what she regarded as a natural and beautiful act of love between them last night was enough to cause her disgrace and execution. If there was ever to be any happiness for them together, they must show none of their true feelings in the foreseeable future. It was a bleak thought.

On the morning of the day they reached Baiae, Tigellinus managed to speak with Serena alone, having insisted the horses turn off on the road to Puteoli instead of their destination. The carriage wheels ran into a ditch where the paving stones were cracked, and Leander was kept busy giving orders to the six men from Marcipor's tavern.

Serena took the opportunity to remind him, "I have enemies in the palace. Here as well as Rome. Please, take care."

He covered her hands with his. "I know, *carissima*. I know this court better than you do. Do you love me?"

The question was unexpected, but she answered without hesitation, "Of course I do."

She wondered if anyone else, Agrippina, for instance, had ever seen the gentleness in the smile with which he received her straightforward answer.

"You are the only woman in Rome who wouldn't simper and play games and be the arch enchantress after a question like that. We'll have our day, my love. And our years." As he let her hands go, he slapped them playfully. "I'll have you

yet, you know. I'm making plans. They certainly don't involve your being punished for the most natural act of life."

She wondered if, in spite of his protests, he really understood how easily some enemy could destroy them both. "Be careful. When we meet before these people in the court, remember."

He laughed. "I'll treat you as a senior vestal, and no more."

Only a little relieved, she saw him join the others and get things under way. Hagar looked out of the carriage and muttered, "I hope he keeps his word."

The fact that she must have heard their conversation frightened Serena all over again. If they had been indiscreet before her, others might discover their secret as well. Her muscles seemed to freeze. She smiled stiffly, said, "It will never happen again as long as I wear Vesta's robes."

"What will never happen, my lady?"

"No intimate laughter, no intimate touch. Nothing that can give anyone a false impression."

"The gods be thanked for that. If he remembers not to give anyone a *true* impression either."

"Hagar!"

"Remember."

Serena couldn't scold her for the stern reminder.

At the seaside resort of Baiae, which lay bright with signs of wealth under the winter sun, Philip Tigellinus gave them one of his efficient-policeman salutes and left the two women in the hands of the Empress Agrippina's house slaves. Hagar shuffled off to examine the quarters assigned to her lady, and Serena was led through the exquisitely furnished villa of the empress with all the respect that might have been shown to the Lady Maxima herself. Serena had not intended to mention the assault by the Praetorians, and in agreement with Tigellinus, had described to Leander the murder of the vestal groom as the work of prowling ex-soldiers as yet unidentified. But to her surprise, both Agrippina and her daughter-in-law, the Empress Octavia, were already aware of the attack, if not of the actual criminals. Serena wondered if Leander had sent a messenger ahead with a report to his patroness. She couldn't imagine why he should have done so.

A Cappadocian usher, one among the seven hundred slaves and freedmen in Agrippina's personal service, led Serena through the formal atrium, then an even more awesome

council chamber, marble-walled with pillars at each of the four entrances, and finally through the pleasant, old-fashioned peristyle to the garden terrace overlooking the little bay, a kind of offshoot of the great Naples bay. The waters sparkled in the sunlight, startling Serena by their contrast with gloomy, fog-bound Rome.

The peristyle was shadowed, closed off from the light, and Serena had to shade her eyes for a few seconds before she made out two elegantly dressed women seated with a tiny mosaic table between them. On the taboret were the remains of a bowl of figs and dates which must have been imported from one of the desert lands, since they were currently scarce in the Roman markets. A half-dozen female attendants were grouped at one end of the terrace, out of hearing, and chattering so much among themselves they seemed totally unaware of the presence of the two empresses.

Serena bowed slightly to the two women, a careful nod that was the product of long practice. It was meant to indicate that in the eyes of a Roman citizen the status of a vestal was equal to that of an empress. Agrippina understood these nuances very well, returned the nod by inclining her dark elegantly coiffed auburn head and smiling. It was not a smile that reached her eyes. She had never found life a laughing matter.

"It was good of you to make this long, tedious journey just to oblige my stepson. Britannicus will be most grateful." She signed, gave the nervous, perennially upset Octavia a side glance expressive of all her sympathy. "The dear boy has had more ill luck than he deserves."

Young Octavia, a pretty girl whose charms never managed to overcome her unhappiness and a general pessimism about life, put in passionately, "Only you understand, dear Empress. We've no one else in the world. Our father was killed. Britannicus was robbed of the throne—"

"Dear child," Agrippina assured her gently but with unmistakable hints at evil deeds elsewhere, "the doings of powerful men in government are a mystery to me. They chose my son. I am repaid for not protesting more fiercely and fighting for Britannicus' rights that night. Now Nero wants to get rid of his old mother. He knows I felt the injustice of his stealing . . . I mean to say, *taking* the throne."

These were dangerous waters indeed, and Serena wanted no part of the conversation. She looked away vaguely, concentrating upon the pretty attendants flirting over the marble

wall with male travelers riding a longboat in from a bireme on the horizon. Serena could see the big square sails spread and wondered where the galley was headed now. Probably Ostia, the seaport for Rome. She wondered if one day she and Tigellinus might take such a ship and sail up to that strange Gallic land of her birth, green and rainy, with its mystic forests where the Druids met for their forbidden rites.

"Or am I being indiscreet?" Agrippina asked Serena, raising her voice slightly.

Serena pretended embarrassment. "I beg your Majesty's indulgence. I'm afraid my attention was caught by that stunning view of the water. It is the first time I have seen the sea in almost twenty years."

Agrippina was gracious. "Whatever my indiscretion in defending my dearest stepchildren, I am quite sure your own good sense would prevent your repeating in certain quarters anything you hear from us today. Come and sit down, *carissima*. Octavia and I find so few people to whom we can unburden ourselves these days. His spies—that is, imperial spies—are everywhere."

Serena was much too cautious to ask whose spies they were. She had a nasty suspicion that if she sympathized with Agrippina against Nero, her own words would be remembered against her later when mother and son made up their differences. It was the way of the world.

Octavia had been giving her a critical examination for a long time, with no attempt at Agrippina's good manners. In her abrupt way she asked curiously, "What was it like when those wretches tried to assault you?"

This was how Serena learned that Leander must have sent a messenger flying ahead to Baiae to report the trouble. She was careful to dismiss it as trivial. She didn't want the empresses ordering in the Praetorians to testify.

Serena appeared surprised. "Fortunately, your Majesty, it came to nothing." She kept to the story agreed upon between herself and Tigellinus. "They were soldiers, ex-legionaries, I believe. They were drinking and had no idea of my identity. One of them tried to force me to join them in their drinking downstairs. The new Praetorian prefect arrived by chance, and sent them on their way."

Agrippina interrupted Octavia's next question. "Tigellinus saved you, did he? Gallantry is quite uncharacteristic of the man I am acquainted with." Both women, knowing her long

association with the prefect and what she owed to him, found her sour comment astonishing, until Serena decided belatedly that it was based on Philip's apparent defection to Nero. How strange, and how sad that mother and son, who had been so close before he came to power, should become enemies in less than two years!

Serena dismissed the idea of a gallant Tigellinus. If there was one person she hoped would not discover Philip's real feelings for another woman, it was Agrippina. Serena suspected her jealousy could be terrible. She said indifferently, "I think it was his mere presence that sent the soldiers running. They would naturally be afraid of the Praetorian prefect, whether he was Burrus or Tigellinus."

Agrippina sighed. "Both men were once in my employ. Burrus is now my son's most intimate friend and companion." Her eyes were busy upon the tall, slim vestal in her pristine white gown and head covering with the ribbons flying from the hair carefully plaited in the religious fashion.

I would have been more popular with her if I wore the torn, stained nightgown that was ruined at the inn, Serena decided.

"Lady Serena, you look different in some way, warmer, more approachable than the dreadful night when my husband ate too much of that wretched dish."

"I was very busy that night, Empress."

Obviously Agrippina wasn't used to being answered so directly—unlike her son, who was said to foster frankness among his intimates during these first years of his power. Her smile remained. It was her eyes which chilled the vestal, suggesting endless things in those deep-set, shadowed depths.

"I am rebuked, and rightly so, my dear. You were very busy over my husband that night. Alas, the results do not seem to have helped him. Almost the . . ."

Almost the reverse, in fact?

Agrippina heard Octavia catch her breath and must have felt the girl staring at her, because she corrected herself quickly.

"I have never properly thanked you for your attempt to save the emperor. You have learned a great deal from our friend Xenophen of Cos. He is here at my villa now, seeing to my poor stepson, who—I am sorry to say—is unwell again."

Octavia burst into tears, startling them all. "They are poisoning him. They must be."

The female attendants stopped gossiping to watch the distraught young woman. Agrippina, realizing that her own incautious words were responsible, turned to her while demanding helplessly, "What shall we do? Calm, my dear. Do get hold of yourself. Lady Serena, the poor child has these ridiculous fears that my son is trying to destroy her brother. How can we prove her wrong? He is thoughtless. Talks disgracefully of careers he might have in the theater. Imagine! But his ingratitude to me has nothing to do with his wife and his stepbrother. We must make her understand. . . . Octavia, my child, do stop crying."

Plain common sense often saved such a situation. Serena knelt before the girl, covering Octavia's wringing hands with her own. "Your brother is safe here in her Majesty's house, surely! Prince Britannicus' servants belong to her Majesty and to you, don't they?"

Agrippina answered for the girl. "Yes, yes. They are all slaves we trust. That is, as nearly as possible. Shall I send for Xenophon?"

Octavia raised her head. Her panic and excitement were all too clear in her reddened face and tear-drenched eyes. "Nobody else. I don't trust them." She snatched her hands away from Serena. "I don't trust her!"

Serena rose, looked questioningly at Agrippina, who nodded to her, said, "Later, my dear. We will arrange to have you take my stepson's will tomorrow."

Serena was dismissed. She hadn't reached the peristyle doors when she heard Octavia's next hysterical outburst.

"Don't let her go to my brother. She is from my husband. From Nero."

Agrippina lost her temper and said brusquely, "You are being impolite, Octavia! You know perfectly well that he himself asked that the Lady Serena come here. Please have the grace to treat the august lady as she deserves."

This didn't prevent the female attendants from looking openmouthed at Serena, who straightened to her full height, wrapped herself in the dignity of her office, and followed the Nubian usher to her own quarters.

The girl was mad. There could be no other reason for her cruel, baseless accusations. Or had someone in Nero's entourage hinted at Serena's complicity in the death of the old emperor? Who was her real enemy?

# 13

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Still worried, and beginning to wish herself safely back at the Vestals' House in Rome, Serena scarcely heard Hagar's complaints until the old woman said, "You'd have done better not to take the journey in the first place. Then I wouldn't have got a clout on the chin and you wouldn't have had to be rescued by that cutthroat prefect."

Never to have loved Philip that night? Never to have known that someday she would have his children and a new, unimaginably exciting life as his wife?

"What am I thinking of?" she asked herself aloud. "The gods destined me to make this journey. Venus herself presided."

"Not Vesta, I'll wager," Hagar muttered sourly as she finished piling her mistress's white garments which she would order sent to members of the local Fullers' Guild for cleaning.

Serena wondered how much the wise Hagar really knew, but being wise, the old woman understood that it could never be discussed. To get away from the dangerous subject, Serena asked, "What are the conditions here? Is the household as upset as the empresses are?"

"Terrible. Everyone suspects everyone else."

"But why, Hagar? I should think anyone living here would be divinely happy. Have you looked out there at the sea? I never dreamed it could be so blue and so vast. It goes on forever. And as for this bedchamber . . . Did you ever see such splendor?" She circled the big room with its several stiff, narrow beds scattered against various walls and covered by thick, spun-gold spreads. Lamps hung from walls and pillars everywhere. Rugs from the eastern Mediterranean, exquisite mosaic taborets, a cabinet containing a library of poetry and dramas plus an inordinate number of histories written by the late Emperor Claudius.

Serena remarked with a total lack of comprehension, "How strange to have all this and still be jealous of her son's life!"

"Not his life, august lady. His power."

Very shrewd of Hagar. Had it always been power that Julia Agrippina wanted from life? Or was there a time when she and Philip had loved and laughed and made plans for the future? Did Philip touch and kiss every fold of her body? In that moment Serena knew what deep, searing jealousy could be like. She changed the subject again hurriedly.

"Come and see the ship out beyond the bay. It must be wonderful to sail out on those blue waters with the sun glimmering on the foam in all the little hollows."

Hagar laughed, a kind of hoarse cackle. "You wouldn't say that on a rough, stormy night with those pretty blue waters looking black as Tartarus and you sick enough to empty yourself inside out."

"Hagar, you take the romance out of everything, even the wine-dark sea."

"The what?"

"What the poet Homer called the sea. . . . I think it was Homer."

Hagar snorted. "There's a poet for you. All I can say is, I'm not drinking any dark blue wine."

Serena gave her up as a hopeless realist.

Late in the day, Claudia Acté, the emperor's mistress, came to see Serena.

"Caesar wishes to welcome you to Baiae, august lady. He is delighted that you were permitted to come. Philip Tigellinus told me who you were, how you had been so disrespectfully treated on the road, and asked me to look out for you. Are you comfortable?"

"Very comfortable, thank you. Luxuriously so, as you may see, Lady Acté."

The young woman waved away the title. She had changed very little since her accession to power. The same simply done dark hair, eyes with very little application of cosmetics, the light stole and palla such as an ordinary Roman citizen's wife would wear, scarcely any jewelry. But most of all, her simplicity and sincerity of manner remained.

"Please, Lady Serena, call me Acté. All the rest of my honors I remove when I am in my bath. Nero—I mean Caesar—is coming here to a meeting with the Armenian envoys

about the peace with Parthia, and he asked me to stop and see you. That is, he has heard there is a new beauty visiting his mother. He wanted me to assure you that the court welcomes anyone who will, as he says, add fresh loveliness to that stale bouquet."

Evidently Nero did not know Serena's real identity. She didn't know whether she was glad or sorry. They had once been friends. But she let that go, and asked instead, "Why don't the Armenian envoys report to his villa?"

Acté shrugged, made a little moue with her mouth.

"Because the empress ordered them here, to present their credentials to her. Burrus and Seneca insisted that he must stand up to her. Nero has always been easy with women. And the empress is so very—"

"I know." Serena looked around. This sort of conversation in Agrippina's own house was worse than dangerous. It was incredibly stupid. She put her finger to her lips. Acté understood and added quickly, "—very strong and wise." She glanced at Hagar.

Serena reassured her. "Hagar has been a second mother to me. She is discreet."

"I should hope so!" Hagar said, bristling with indignation that the matter should have come up at all. "It's the walls you have to worry about here."

Satisfied, Acté explained her visit. "There is a little recess off the council chamber. Will you bear me company, Lady Serena, while I listen to Nero? He tells me today will be special in some way. He likes me to hear him and criticize." She shrugged. "I'm afraid I love him too much for that. He has been very good to me. And he seems so young. With a childish enthusiasm that moves me—I can't tell you how much. So dear to me, and yet, he is master of the world."

"Well," Serena remarked in a low voice, "he or his mother, certainly."

She took up a thin-spun web of white wool and threw it around her shoulders. Hagar arranged her head covering correctly. It too clung about her shoulders and fell into graceful folds below her waist. The two women looked out into the wide, pillared hall. Fortunately, no one was in sight. It was before the rush of dinner guests, and the household of slaves was resting or preparing the elaborate dinner menu.

"It is much better that the empress should not know where we are going or why," Acté explained.

Serena understood perfectly. They moved with very little sound over the exquisite multicolored mosaics of the floor, past several pillars, to the doors of the long council chamber, which were ajar. At the far end of the room was the dais, where two gilt chairs waited for Agrippina and Nero. Curiously enough, the narrower, smaller throne meant for the consort of the emperor was placed exactly in the center of the dais. Nero's chair, on the contrary, was set slightly to one side. Serena had no doubt this was Agrippina's work.

Feeling like a conspirator, Serena let the smaller woman lead her into one of the alcoves at the side of the room. There were draperies, heavy and dusty from disuse. Acté looked up, shook the folds, and then suggested, "We won't be seen behind these. It is better than drawing the draperies together, which might attract attention." Serena agreed silently. She was beginning to wonder why she had let herself be talked into this underhanded business.

She asked Acté, "Do your slaves know what we are about?"

Puzzled, Acté looked at her. "My slaves?" Then she smiled. "I have no slaves. My beliefs forbid it. All mankind are brothers. Our Lord has said so. It annoys Nero that I like to move about alone, without the retinue he is so generous to offer me. But I prefer it so. In the palace I am not welcomed unless Nero is with me. People don't like women in my position who rise to the bed of an emperor."

She spoke so freely of both her religious beliefs and her position as the emperor's elegant harlot that Serena couldn't understand her at all. Apparently her religion despised no one. And who was her mysterious "Lord"? Serena couldn't help resenting people who ignored the old Roman gods, who had served them so well during Rome's triumphant rise in the world.

She started to ask who Acté's "Lord" was, but the girl whispered, "Sh! They are coming."

Two of Agrippina's Nubian ushers arrived first, carrying long rods of javelin shape. Impressive as similar figures on an Egyptian frieze, they strode to the empress's central throne on the dais. They were followed by a pair of female attendants modestly robed, and then by an arrogant freedman, adviser to the empress and famed for having acquired a fortune an exceedingly short time after he came to power. His jew-

eled hands flashed as he stroked his longish hair and smooth cheeks.

Having prepared the coming of the empress, they all turned in one motion, to receive Agrippina, who walked slowly, flanked by attendants and a slave bearing a gigantic fan of peacock feathers, which he flicked over her head in languid sweeps, as though it were midsummer and not December.

"Holy mother Vestal!" whispered Serena. "She behaves like a Persian satrap."

Acté wasn't amused, however. "It is to impress the world," she whispered back. "So that she and not Nero will retain the imperial aura."

With a grace that never forgot dignity, the empress stepped onto the dais and seated herself, waving away any help from her fluttering attendants. Serena wondered if this determination to show that she needed no help from anyone but herself was rooted in her memories of past misfortunes. Serena was curious about those early days, of which she had heard bits and pieces. She felt that her sympathies might go to the empress more easily if she knew those bitter details.

In her low, distinct voice that Acté and Serena could hear across the room, the empress asked her financial adviser, Pallas, "Where are the Armenian envoys? Weren't they expected by the ninth hour?"

"I believe so, Majesty. There may have been a slight delay. The emperor's villa is very near the boat landings."

Agrippina's strong white fingers closed on the arms of her chair. Serena suspected she was a good deal more nervous than she appeared.

"Send out to find what—or *who*—is detaining them. And, Pallas . . . see to it that they understand again. They are to bring their credentials to this room."

"Yes, Majesty." With one arm across the stomach of his six robes, the tall, effete adviser bowed himself out until he reached the double doors near Acté and Serena. Serena counted five rings of precious stones on his five fingers and compared him with Claudia Acté beside her. A woman who had become the person closest and dearest to the emperor of Rome, yet she dressed and behaved with the utmost simplicity, with no greed, no ambition. And this man who called himself Agrippina's adviser had made himself one of the

richest men in the world by the same relationship to the empress.

Agrippina's attendants, obviously unnerved by the long, awkward wait, began to whisper among themselves. Acté looked at Serena, whispered, "What can have happened? Nero should be here by now."

She had hardly gotten the words out when they heard the cadenced footsteps of soldiers, and four Praetorian guards appeared escorting six bearded men, dressed curiously, unlike the athletic Romans, in velvet and brocade gowns that swept the floor. Several of the older foreigners wore flat-topped round hats like Median astrologers. Although they were somewhat taller than the average Roman, they were physically slender, even fragile. But they did not look stupid. Serena hoped the Romans were not going to judge them by their physical appearance.

The Praetorians, forming a phalanx around them, stepped aside, leaving a way to the dais. Serena was watching the reaction of the empress, who had stiffened noticeably and looked her majestic self as she seemed about to win this latest skirmish with her son.

Serena felt Acté's hand grab her wrist tightly.

"His step. I know the sound."

Barely a second or two later Serena was startled to hear footsteps in the narrow, less imposing hall leading to the double doors near the alcove. Serena could not have said, like Acté, which were Nero's footsteps, but the young emperor himself entered with an impressive entourage, including his mother's financial adviser, Pallas, who walked backward, trying to explain something in the high-pitched voice of anger and panic. Apparently, in seeking the Armenian envoys, he had the bad luck to run into Nero.

Stocky and well fed, Nero stepped into the chamber in a lilac silk tunic too long for the current mode, and made in the fashion of a Greek chiton. Fastened to his shoulders, which appeared athletic and in trim, was a long silk cape, also of lilac. The most prominent of his jewels was the huge emerald strung on gold that he often used to aid one of his near-sighted eyes. He seemed in excellent spirits, which was more than one could say of Agrippina's confidant, Pallas.

Serena heard the Greek protest furiously, ". . . diverted, your Majesty! Six guests of the empire stolen on their way to the court."

"To my mother's court," Nero corrected with his wide-lipped grin. He was well aware that the Armenian envoys had stopped halfway down the long chamber and turned in confusion to face Nero. They now presented their backs to the dais and the Empress Agrippina, who had risen to her full height and stood with only her fingers curling and uncurling to show her agitation.

Serena had been fascinated to see the reaction upon the empress of her son's arrival. As a result, she failed to note the arrival of Philip Tigellinus in his full Praetorian uniform. He stood apart from the emperor's group in a negligent pose with his hands clasped behind him. Nero walked straight across the chamber toward the startled Armenians while his elderly advisers, Seneca and Burrus, hustled along in his wake, the philosopher wheezing audibly as he tried to keep up with his pupil.

Pallas hadn't given up and was still arguing vainly with Nero in a curious sidling position. "Your Majesty, the audience has already been given. The empress received the visitors. It will only confuse—"

Nero stopped, raised the emerald to his eye, and studied the excited Greek. Pallas was silenced. The council chamber was so still everyone heard the asthmatic breathing of Seneca as he moved close behind Nero, perhaps in support, perhaps to urge him on.

Serena glanced at Philip, who seemed to have divorced himself from the entire affair and was regarding the roof with a bored expression. Serena suspected he was ready for anything, however. In view of this great imperial crisis, Serena was ashamed to admit, even to herself, that at this moment she found herself noting Tigellinus' body, his dark-skinned, powerful thighs and his equally bare arms.

Three nights ago I was in those arms, she reminded herself. . . . And those thighs locked my body in embrace.

Was it only the physical man she loved? No! There were other qualities, his unexpected tenderness, his humor, his care for her, his dealings with Hagar.

She looked away quickly, concentrating on Nero, who lowered his emerald and said in the voice of one dismissing a slave too much underfoot, "Friend Pallas, you are dismissed."

Almost stammering in his indignation, the adviser reminded him, "I am here as an attendant upon the empress. I do not leave the chamber except under her order."

Among the crowd of observers, a few caught their breath. Nero, however, said airily, "You misunderstand me. You are dismissed not only from this chamber but from the imperial service."

Agrippina's sandal grated on the edge of the dais step, but when her women reached out to her, she struck them away angrily. She forgot her cold dignity long enough to call out across the room, in tones of burning anger, "Do you forget yourself so far as to dismiss my servants from my service?"

Seneca whispered to Nero, who nodded impatiently and waved him away. "No, Mother. Not at all. I dismiss him from the imperial service. If you wish to retain him in some domestic capacity, as a butler or an usher, you are perfectly free to do so. But Burrus here will receive his keys, his records, and his accounts, such as they are. He is no longer free to rifle the treasury that belongs to the citizens of Rome."

Agrippina was left speechless, but Pallas, backing away respectfully from the emperor, muttered, "The eternal gods witness, I have only done what others have done. I swear by Apollo, taker of oaths . . . I swear by the divine Julius Caesar, that I did nothing except for the good of Rome. I swear . . ."

His voice faded as he reached the doors.

"Insolent thief!" Burrus condemned him roughly. "Threatening his emperor."

Nero grinned again. "No. Merely swearing himself out of office."

His voice carried to every corner of the great chamber, and after a first astonished stillness, most of the witnesses roared with laughter at the imperial witticism. Serena saw that Tigellinus did not smile. He was expressionless.

The Empress Agrippina could cope with everything but ridicule. She remained on the dais looking unusually pale but as majestic as ever. Nero, meanwhile, made a sweeping gesture of throwing the ends of his cloak over the opposite shoulder and then stood directly in the way of the Armenian envoys, who had been exchanging uneasy glances at each other. The actor in Nero came to the fore. To Serena's surprise, he spoke in Greek, a language with which the Armenians were obviously familiar.

"Excellencies, the emperor himself gives you welcome to Rome. Messengers from our victorious General Corbulo with

our legions on the Parthian border tell me that your king is willing to act as peacemaker between the Roman borders and the Parthian Empire."

"Very true, mighty Caesar. Our gracious king—may his name be inscribed forever among the gods—has ordered us to deliver a pledge from the Parthians on our eastern borders to the Roman protectorates on our western borders." The spokesman for the foreign envoys salaamed each time he mentioned his own king, the Parthians, or the Romans. There were whispers about this, and much jogging of elbows as the free-living Romans mocked the obsequiousness of these easterners.

"Good. Very good." Still, Nero made no effort to take his seat on the dais, thus leaving Agrippina and her adherents on the very fringes of this official business. "When you send your first messages to your king tonight—and we permit you to use the imperial post—please tell him that Rome favors peace at all times when it is consistent with our honor."

"Armenia is proud to act in this capacity between two such earth-shaking powers, your Majesty." More salaams followed.

Serena lost interest in the smaller intricacies of this diplomatic palaver. She saw that Nero and the Armenians, with Seneca close behind, had adjourned to a little circle across the room. Tigellinus, who had remained apart from them, strode now past the circle, through the dumbfounded courtiers, to the dais at the end of the room. He offered his hand to the empress, who hesitated, then took it as he assisted her off the dais and escorted her toward the doors at the far end of the chamber. As they passed the emperor and his group, Burrus tapped Nero's shoulder. Nero went on talking with the envoys, ignoring the scene behind him. Serena could hear his excited remark: "But then, if you are interested in the theater, you must have attended the performances in Athens and Corinth as you passed through."

One of the envoys assured him that they had.

"Then you can tell me the truth. Truth is hard for a Caesar to hear, Excellencies. Do those Greek theaters permit outsiders, contestants from Rome, for instance, to enter their music contests?"

"Absolutely, mighty Caesar."

Nero clapped him on the back. "But this is capital! I have been hoping all my life for such a contest. I have my own recipe for certain juices, special fruits which I take to lubricate

my voice. Even so, I could never win. Not against professionals, men who have spent their lives in nothing but practice. I have my time so taken up. It isn't easy being emperor of Rome."

At the far doors, Agrippina stopped but did not turn around.

The Armenians salaamed. Their leader said fervently, "Mighty Caesar, I have a certain small talent as an oracle in my native city. I see in the near future a triumph for your Majesty. I can almost wager that if your Majesty enters a musical competition in Greece—or elsewhere in the world—you will win."

"You see that in the stars, do you?" Nero asked him eagerly, almost beside himself. "You really see that?"

The reply to this was never in doubt by anyone except the emperor himself.

Philip and Agrippina had left the chamber. Serena was proud of her lover's conduct, and she pitied the forgotten empress. Nevertheless, when the great doors closed behind the pair, Serena knew a sudden aching jealousy.

Her thoughts were still dwelling painfully on the empress and Tigellinus when the group around the emperor broke up and Nero's pleasant voice startled her by its nearness. He had stopped directly in front of the alcove and was peering at her nearsightedly. In spite of his high position in the world, he looked suddenly like the boy Serena remembered long ago, the night his stepfather died, when he said there were so many things he would rather do than rule the world. It seemed that he had obtained both worlds.

He exclaimed, "And here is my audience. Acté, what do you think? We've got the Parthians to offer a fifty-year peace. Who would have believed it? How did I do today?" To Serena he seemed genuinely interested, almost agitated over Acté's answer, which was a foregone conclusion.

"Never better, Majesty. I was so thrilled, and so was this lady you asked me to bring." Serena noted that her identity was not referred to.

Nero looked at Serena, who told him honestly, "Your Majesty dominated the interview at all times."

His tension seemed to dissolve. He smiled with relief. "Acté, you must see that your friend joins us at our entertainment for the envoys tonight."

Acté hugged Serena's arm as the two women followed in

the wake of the imperial party. "He has freed himself of the yoke at last, I am so proud of him! He is his own ruler now. You mustn't care that he didn't recognize you. He has so much on his mind."

Serena agreed thoughtfully. If Nero was back of the attacks on her, it was curious that he hadn't recognized her. Probably his bad eyesight was at fault.

"You are pleased, aren't you?" Acté interrupted her thoughts. "The entertainment is in a little park just beyond the town. Trees and lamplight and a banquet. Music and entertainment. Nero has created a forest and peopled it with his guests. Wait until you see it. He is the greatest artist in the world, I do believe. You must come. It's a masquerade. No one will know you. If they do, Nero can make it right with your chief vestal." She teased, "An imperial command. You must come!"

Serena wondered if Philip would be there at Nero's "entertainment." What did Philip and Agrippina talk about when they were alone? The old days of their love? Probably they didn't talk. Did they still make love?

Acté persisted, "Well?"

"An imperial command can't be refused, can it?" Serena asked, surprised at her own ambivalence. Was it possible she really wanted to do this dangerous thing? She would be placing herself in a position where Nero might destroy her in some way; yet she agreed. "I'll come."

She suspected that her motive was the despicable one of showing Philip she did not care about his relations with a woman he had known almost all his life. This had nothing whatever to do with her duties to Vesta. In the last few days she had become another woman, a woman she did not like, and respected even less.

# 14

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Hagar was against the entire business but couldn't think of a way to refuse the invitation by the emperor himself.

"Not that there's much to choose between him and his mother," she grumbled, keeping her voice low however. "Imagine a mother that suspects her own son sent those ruffians to attack a vestal virgin!"

Serena stopped considering the various masquerade costumes sent over to her by Acté for her to select. "What? Hagar, where did you hear such a thing?"

"Half the slave population in the service of the empress. It's everywhere. I think that fellow Leander started it all. And Agrippina believes it."

Serena had kept her curiosity on a tight rein during the hours since the encounter between Agrippina and Nero. But with night shrouding the villa and its unhappy owner, Serena found it impossible to contain her jealousy any longer. She pretended her remark was casual as she decided on the bright yellow silk and gauze gown of a Roman lady of quality and held up the stole to examine it.

"Well, Hagar, we needn't waste our sympathies on the empress. I imagine her guest has kept her well occupied."

Hagar said, "Take care with that gauze. I can see your flesh through it."

Serena bit her lip impatiently. "Is Agrippina alone, or isn't she?"

"I don't see how, what with Britannicus and Octavia and all their household crowded in with about a thousand slaves belonging to the empress."

"Don't exaggerate. Did Tigellinus stay here this afternoon?"

Hagar gave her a side glance. "So that's what all these questions are about! I had my suspicions." Chuckling maliciously, she ducked, as Serena hurled a sandal at her.

"Answer me!"

"Can't say!" She held up a hand to ward off the sandal's mate. "I swear it, august lady. I saw them talking with some animation in the peristyle shortly after the Lady Acté left you. That's all."

It would have to do. Philip hadn't looked very loving when he left the council with the empress. While she dressed, Serena continued to remember and to tell herself that if Hagar saw them "talking," they did no more than talk.

It was embarrassing to discover that she didn't even know how to wear a fashionable Roman gown. The style was not so different from her own vestal robes, but there was a sexual aura about the shining gold cords which caught up the bosom of the gown, crossing over and under each breast so that they looked far more prominent than was strictly proper. She mentioned this to Hagar, who sniffed.

"You'd look a deal more noticeable if you didn't wear one of these 'fashion' gowns. It's what's expected of the patrician ladies invited to these parties. Anyway, they aren't going to recognize you with the headdress and veil."

"I hope not. Can you imagine if some enemy . . . Hagar, I shouldn't be doing this!"

"There, my lady, you're upsetting yourself over nothing. You have no enemies. Who would hate a faithful servant of the good hearth goddess?"

Serena didn't bother to correct her innocent assumption. She even tried to reassure herself on the subject. She was so stunned by the tall, slim, golden woman who looked back at her from the silver mirror that she blinked, afraid it would go away, but the reflection remained. Just once she wanted to look like this in public, especially before Tigellinus.

Hagar reminded her grumpily, "If I were going with you, instead of Lady Acté's people, you'd be safer."

Serena forced herself not to glance again at her reflection. "I thought you said I had no enemies."

"It's not enemies I'm thinking about, my lady. Looking like that, you've got trouble with your friends. You will take care, my lady?"

Touched by her sincerity, Serena hugged her.

"Dear Hagar, I will." She tried to explain, wondering if this woman who had known so many experiences could really understand what it was to live almost twenty-six years, more

than two-thirds of her expected life span, without knowing all the feelings of a normal woman.

"You must put yourself in my place, Hagar. Imagine how women like to walk about, flirt a little. Innocently. Be admired just a little, as a woman, not the servant of a goddess. Imagine wearing a fashionable gown for the first and perhaps only time. All I want to do tonight is pretend to be someone else. Just for a few hours out of a lifetime."

They heard the door latch raised at the same time someone knocked.

Hagar said, "That'll be the Lady Acté's slaves come for you."

"She doesn't call them slaves. She's a strange woman, Hagar, with her philosophical notions. She's been a good influence on Nero."

When Hagar opened the door, they were both startled to see her old mentor, the physician Stertinus Xenophen, an elderly man, grizzled and slightly stooped, but with his mental and emotional powers by no means diminished. His gray eyes peered hard at Hagar, who blocked his view of Serena. The latter hurriedly took up her all-concealing weather cape, which she wore in her vestal service. She didn't know whether he had seen her clothing, but by the time he entered the room, she was fairly well covered.

She started forward, glad enough to see him but hoping he would not detain her. The longer she remained in his presence, the more likely he was to notice her costume. She didn't believe he would gossip, knowing how dangerous it would be to her, but the fear made her so nervous that both her smile and her hand in greeting betrayed her.

He brushed aside formalities. She thought he saw the bright yellow gauze and the ends of the golden waist-hugging cords that swung beneath her cape as she moved, and his lips thinned with disapproval. She felt his right to disapprove. The stink of sickness was in his own long gray robe, wet in some spots and blotched with dried stains elsewhere. Clearly, he had been at work with a sick patient.

He motioned her to the door. "You are needed to help me. I have just brought the young prince through another attack of the falling sickness."

"I'll change. Give me just a moment," she said quickly, but he cut her off.

"No. He needs you for legal matters." He added in a voice

whose irony did not escape her, "It won't take you long. Then you may return to your . . . other vestal duties."

Thoroughly ashamed and resenting the conscience that shamed her, Serena wrapped herself tightly in the cape.

"Hagar, please bring my tablets and stylus."

A subdued, anxious Hagar brought them to her. "What will I tell the emperor's servants when they come with your litter?"

"Just ask them to wait for me." Serena's guilt made her sound defiant. She couldn't help it. It was a crushing disappointment to be reminded of her duty when she had so nearly become a "typical patrician lady" for one evening.

She and the physician walked through the echoing halls of the palatial villa, where all the lamps were burning smokily. She asked how ill Britannicus was.

"Probably no more serious than the last attack, but his sister, I mean the young empress, constantly upsets him. This afternoon she was particularly emotional. Weeping and insisting that someone in the emperor's entourage was trying to murder him. Poor child! He is pulled one way and then another. So, of course, it brought on one of his attacks."

"Does he suspect anyone by name?"

He shrugged. "Who knows? One minute it is Burrus. Another, it's that ex-horse dealer, Tigellinus. He talked of suspecting his stepbrother, the emperor, which is dangerous talk, if anyone repeats it." He laughed shortly. "He even suspected you at one moment."

"Octavia accused me today," she confessed. "How is the empress? I mean the real . . ."

Before she could fumble out of that trap, he helped her. "The Empress Agrippina? I haven't seen her. They say she has been secluded since she received the Armenian envoys this afternoon."

They had reached the young prince's quarters, and Serena set herself sternly to concentrate on the unfortunate Britannicus rather than the whereabouts of the all-too-fortunate new Praetorian prefect.

Among the many silk pillows of his couch, Britannicus looked small and pale, milk-faced. His huge eyes stared in mortal fear at the velvet drapes that Xenophen pushed aside to enter his sickroom. Two elderly female slaves had been attending him. At sight of the old physician, the prince dis-

missed the women with a feeble wave of the hand. They slipped away, past Xenophen and Serena.

The physician spoke quickly. To Serena's ears he seemed loud, unnaturally jovial.

"I've brought the vestal to record your will, as you asked, Highness. But she agrees with me. You are so recovered it is a joke to think of matters like wills. Isn't that so, august lady?"

"Indeed, your Highness." The sick prince's sudden eagerness put a lump in her throat. She tried to get even more sincerity into her hurried agreement. "Indeed, you will be the orator at all our funerals."

Britannicus tried to sit up, putting his weight on his elbows. "I don't believe what my sister says about you. You have kind eyes. My stepmother, the Lady Agrippina, is right. You couldn't do such a thing."

It was welcome news to her that Agrippina had been her defender. With the prince's weary gesture of permission, she sat down on the edge of a cerulean arm-chair near his couch, trying to keep the skirts of her cape together, and opened the wooden-bordered wax tablets, examining the flat edge of the stylus. Xenophen plumped up the pillows behind his patient's tousled head, and then, surreptitiously, passed a white towel over the boy's mouth, which still showed a faint rim of saliva after the strain of his convulsion.

"Do you feel like dictating now, your Highness?"

The words poured out of Britannicus in a torrent of uncontrolled excitement, while his fingers picked at the heavy gold threads of his bedcover.

"Yes. Yes. There's no time to lose. I want Octavia to have everything of importance, my books, which my father, the late emperor, wrote. And my clothing and furniture and my quadriga. The Empress Agrippina must have my jewels. She has been—tell her, please, Xenophen—she has been more of a mother to me than my real mother, Messalina, ever was. All my own mother cared about was men! Don't write that down, Lady Serena."

"No, your Highness."

He sighed, looked at Xenophen. "Could I have wine? Golden Falernian. And you pour it yourself and drink first."

It was so pitiable that this young man, who had harmed no one, should have to go so stealthily in fear of his life. Where did the danger come from? Would the man responsible ever

be punished for the fright he gave the boy, as well as for the crime itself, which had hung over Britannicus from the moment his father died? Serena reached for his hand almost unconsciously and squeezed the sweating, pale flesh. His tired smile rewarded her.

Xenophen poured wine into a large silver goblet, begged the prince's pardon, brought the goblet to his own lips. After a hesitation and a nod from Britannicus, he offered the goblet to Serena. She also drank a few sips, finding the wine tasteless under the tense stare of the prince.

Satisfied, Britannicus received the goblet and drank thirstily. Xenophen was forced to stop him.

"Enough for now, Highness. You may have more later."

"But I am thirsty."

"Later, Highness," Xenophen repeated, and waved Serena away, saying impatiently, "Go along. You are no longer needed."

Serena closed her wax tablets, got up, inclined her head to Britannicus with respect, and left the prince's quarters, badly shaken by the pain and mental suffering she had seen.

Two powerful Moorish litter bearers waited in the wide hall outside the chamber assigned to Serena. She passed them deep in thought, hardly aware of their presence. Hagar was waiting for her.

"How is the young prince?"

"Terribly frightened, thanks to that wretched sister of his. But Xenophen will care for him.

"You'd better hurry, my lady. Don't want to make too much of a late entrance. The more attention you attract, the more likely someone will guess who you are."

"Very true." Nervous and wishing she had never agreed to this night excursion, she reached for a vial of perfume. It almost toppled over, but she caught it in time and poured a few drops on her hands, then ran her fingers under her chin and over her throat. Meanwhile, Hagar dropped the golden gauze veil over her head and carefully settled a narrow diadem around the crown of her head to anchor the veil. She stood off, studying Serena with pride in which a faint apprehension was mingled.

"Take care, my lady."

She had heard Hagar's warning many times before, but never been more conscious of its wisdom. She hurried out while promising the faithful old woman, "I will. I must."

The litter bearers and the tall, arrogant lictor who was their leader set off at a rapid clip for the wooded area on the far side of the bay, which was not a great distance from Nero's palatial new villa but remained slightly primitive for purposes like tonight's entertainment. At a distance it appeared to be a strange, dark cape high over the sea, made enchanting by the lamps which hung from so many stout branches.

There seemed to be no formality about the place, and when Serena was being assisted out of the litter at the noisy entrance to the glade, Claudia Acté was waiting for her, a thoughtful gesture which Serena appreciated even more when she looked around at the assemblage of silver-, gold-, and scarlet-clad guests, male and female, all dazzling in their full complement of jewels.

Acté saw her staring wide-eyed at several groups of lovers, four in one group, lying—or gyrating—on the wet, dead leaves of a glade nearby.

"Are they really . . . ? How disgusting!"

Acté dismissed the litter bearers and drew her away, hoping her comment would not be repeated by the bearers, who now loped off to join their fellows in gossip and drinking. There they would remain until their masters were completely drunk and ready to be carried home, or, less often, until their masters found such orgies boring and left of their own accord, hoping their imperial host wouldn't hear of their defection.

"My lady, pretend they do not exist. It is wiser," Acté began as they moved out of sight of the sex-obsessed four and toward a pair of men under a swinging lamp between two trees, likewise behaving in a way that made Serena ill. Was that what men did, swallowing each other like two deadly fish who would end as half-eaten carcasses?

"I'd better not stay. I thought it would be different. I hoped it would be beautiful, like a gathering of the gods on Olympus." She was afraid if she remained longer, her passionate thoughts of the man she loved would be soiled by all these curious uses of the human body.

"It is not all like this," Acté assured her. They had passed beyond what seemed to Serena the dregs of patrician Rome and were spellbound at the magic green light created by the lamps among real evergreens and delicate trees, bushes and unseasonal flowers brought at great expense from the Near

East for this night's festivities. Serena saw a group of young nymphs under the moonlight near the cliff, dancing barefoot in shimmering, transparent tunics, surrounded by their rapt audience, male and female, sitting in a circle, some on the ground, some in backless chairs. The music was furnished by a lyre, a lute, tinkling bells, and some strange instruments like an assortment of tiny oriental drums.

"It was suddenly familiar. I've done this before, she thought, as memories of the Druid worship in the forests of Gaul flashed through her mind. Are we all primitive at heart?"

Acté warned her, "For your own protection, remember: Caesar is appearing tonight as Apollo, with a lyre. But pretend you don't recognize him. He wears a bit of silk over the upper half of his face, with holes for his eyes. A mask, in fact. Naturally, if you feel he deserves praise, it will please him so very much. But it is better if he thinks you are praising him as a musician, not as the emperor."

"If he wants to wear a disguise, you shouldn't have spoiled it by telling me."

For the first time Acté looked at her with a kind of pitying scorn. "Oh, yes, I should, my lady. Otherwise, you might insult him. By mistake."

Understanding a little late, Serena thanked her but asked with genuine disappointment, "Has he changed so much? He was always impetuous, but he was a kindhearted boy when I saw him briefly on the Palatine."

Acté was quick to the defense. "He is still kind. Still generous and loyal to those who are worth his loyalty. But he is still impetuous, too. And he is now master of the world. He can have anything he demands, in all the world. I should think being master of the world would change one a little."

Serena agreed. She looked more closely at the orchestra playing for the lovely, nubile young dancers. The man accompanying them excellently on the lyre was dressed as the sun god. His muscular arms were visible below the sleeves of his white-and-gold robe. The fingers moved skillfully. There were minutes like this when Serena thought it a great pity that Nero couldn't have devoted his life to music and the theater, his first love. He seemed so happy tonight.

But then she recalled this afternoon when he had humiliated and put down his mother for the first time in his life. Yes. He had been happy then. He was growing up. She had a

curious little pinch of regret for the boy who was, and the man he had become, almost in spite of himself.

The music faded off into the night, plaintive, low, and haunting. The young dancers sank gracefully to the grass, accepting the applause from the circle of watchers. One of the watchers, obviously Seneca, in spite of his attempted disguise of a Greek philosopher, got to his feet, calling, "Musicians! Hail to the musicians as well," and he applauded madly.

At once, to Serena's amusement, everyone understood what was expected of him, and there were general shouts of congratulations to the musicians, with special emphasis on the player of the lyre, who arose, bowed in humble thanks, and waved to indicate that he shared the applause with his fellow musicians.

Serena looked around in the green light, squinting behind her veil to make out the real identity of each courtier in the circle. Not one of them could possibly be mistaken for Philip Tigellinus, who was taller, more lean and powerful than the average Roman, but had other qualities that had made him stand out as well. His quiet body movements and the dark, black-rimmed eyes and hawk nose. His brilliant success as prefect. There were times, remembering this last fact about him, that Serena could hardly believe he had demonstrated gentleness and humor with her.

Was he an evil man?

She couldn't be certain. He upheld the law. Was that wicked? With only her own experience to judge, she couldn't stop loving him, nor did she wish to.

Having satisfied himself that his audience applauded his talent and not his high position in the world, Nero threw off the masklike covering of his upper face, laughing uproariously at their well-feigned surprise. He was engulfed by their praise.

But farther away from the center of this noisy celebration Serena could hear other comments, petty and snide:

"Gods! What disgrace will he bring next on his class? The old empress is right. He has no dignity."

"Amateurs! By Bacchus, my ears loathe amateurs, even if they are imperial."

"Hush, he will hear you!"

Someone with a soldier's rough strength pushed Serena aside and even more unceremoniously made his way to the center of the crowd. Serena recognized Burrus, very much

out of his element. He wore a leather tunic that smelled of horseflesh, and in spite of his graying hair, he was still a formidable-looking soldier.

"Caesar, the police prefect, I mean the ex-prefect Tigellinus, has found the man responsible for those foul poems about you. He is holding him now."

Well aware of her own self-centered view, Serena found the one important aspect of this announcement was the fact that Tigellinus was busy at his work now, not occupied with consoling the Empress Agrippina.

To the others listening, the news promised a temperamental explosion from the emperor. They had all drunk enough to hope for such a scene.

Nero's fingers automatically plucked an odd, plaintive note on the lyre. He sighed.

"Well, who is it?"

"An impudent fellow of the Equestrian Order. He'd been of the senatorial class, but lost a fortune betting at the Circus Maximus. He should be executed. Or exiled at the least. For crimes against the majesty of the emperor."

Nero laughed shortly. "I know the man. He blamed me because I support the Green faction. It's Sosianus, isn't it?"

"That's the one."

With a light, almost playful movement Nero struck the lyre against his thigh. "The verses were terrible. They lacked rhyme, tempo, beauty. Everything but reason. What is your advice?"

Burrus looked around, annoyingly aware that everyone in the glade hoped for excitement. He insisted crossly, "When I've said my say about anything, don't make me repeat it."

Several in the crowd gasped at this insult to Nero, but the emperor only laughed at his mentor's courage.

"Forgive me, old friend. But I hardly think he should be punished so severely for bad verses. Just send him on his way."

"But, Caesar, he committed—"

Nero said impatiently, "Free him."

"Yes, Caesar." Burrus saluted and left the group, who buzzed among themselves so loudly they had to be called back to the matter at hand, namely, their entertainment by the emperor, who agreed to play an encore.

Serena took this opportunity to get out of the crowd. She had found nothing in this tawdry patrician orgy that she pre-

ferred to her life as a vestal. And Philip was not here. She started along what appeared to be a path between neatly placed stands of trees, but the leaves that had piled up through the fall and winter were so thick she sank over her sandals in the damp, clinging morass. It had been much easier on the way to the dancers in the clearing above the cliffs.

Through the tangle of trees and hanging greenery came sounds of a scuffle, female giggles, shouts; the females seemed to have slipped away—heavy breathing and sandals crashing through the undergrowth. Serena stepped aside, trying to avoid the merrymakers. Two women rushed by her, laughing, breathless, their veils and skirts fluttering in the night wind. They were followed by three males, two of them stocky, easily winded, and far from young. They wore absurd head-pieces; one appeared to be the wine god Bacchus, one was a horned goat, and the third an ancient king complete with a badly dented crown.

Serena watched them pass and vanish among other trees. She shook her head. She couldn't comprehend their pleasure in promiscuity. She had known only one love and couldn't imagine letting herself be used willingly by other men. Hearing footsteps behind her, she turned and ran in the opposite direction, tearing her cape on a thorny bush but anxious to avoid any lone revelers who would, quite rightly, expect her to enter into the spirit of the orgy.

This was all too close to the terror and fascination she had known as a child when Thora, her Parisii nurse, had taken her to the forbidden rites.

She found she had come full circle back to the clearing between the end of the woods and the waters of the bay far below. Some of Nero's audience had sought privacy in the nearest thicket of bushes or trees, but a half-dozen couples remained, among them a slender blond woman teasing two men in a conversational seduction. Nearer to Serena were the emperor and Claudia Acté. The latter two sat on a black velvet robe decorated with astrological signs in silver. Nero's head was in Acté's lap. She was curling the locks of his fine, fiery hair around her fingers, and looked completely happy. Nero, too, appeared content.

They both saw Serena at the same time as she started to turn away in embarrassment at having intruded on such a

scene. Nero sat up, not in the least concerned, and stared with interest at the veiled golden beauty.

"By the body of Venus! I had no idea my dear Acté was hiding such riches. Come, kneel before us. Let us bathe our eyes in what we see."

Yes. The boy Nero had grown up. It might be well for the world, but at this minute Serena very much wished he was the angry, honest boy whom she could handle and scold so easily. Serena knelt before him. Acté watched with anxiety but said nothing. He leaned forward, his heavy, surprisingly artistic fingers caressing her chin, raising it, as he explained, "To study a curve of the throat that Praxiteles might have envied."

Serena swallowed nervously. "You are very kind, Highness. I mean . . . Majesty."

At the sound of her voice and the memories that her mistake evoked, Nero withdrew his hand as if it had been burned. In his nearsighted way he peered at her through the green light that illuminated the glade. His voice was barely raised above a whisper.

"Are you the vestal, my old friend the Lady Serena?"

She nodded. The lascivious interest drained from his face. He almost stammered. "I didn't recognize you. I wouldn't have ordered your presence here." He added with a sincerity that she could not deny, "The empire needs Vesta's goodwill." Then, as he saw that Serena reacted favorably, he urged her to take the low folding army stool beside him. "My throne is in Acté's lap. Sit down here and tell me all the things you hear that are shut away from me."

She smiled and sat where he indicated, trying vainly to cover the gauze folds of her golden skirts with the torn cape.

"I promise you, Caesar, you will blush with embarrassment."

His big head tilted as he studied her, sensitive to the opinions of any individual who might be a part of his "audience." He was clearly concerned.

"How do you mean, my lady?"

"Because no Caesar has been so praised as yourself—your democratic beliefs, your dislike of the death penalty, your interest in the people rather than the patricians. Every act of yours meets with admiration."

"Except with the Senate."

"Yes," she agreed. "Except with the Senate."

He put his hand out. She clasped it. Acté, who had watched this with her own warm pleasure, suddenly started up.

"Someone is coming. My body servant."

Serena and Nero looked around. The elderly woman ran through the glade, breathless as she reached the emperor and her mistress.

"The empress is on her way. She knows there is a golden-haired lady with the emperor."

Nero got up so quickly he almost knocked Acté over. "My mother? Here?"

"No, Majesty. Your wife."

He thought this was highly amusing. "My pure, untouched bride—here? She's in for a few shocks." He would have relaxed, but Acté, with great presence of mind, whispered, "Serena mustn't be found here. It would be disastrous."

"True. And Octavia would pursue the matter."

Serena had already swung around in a panic. She didn't need Acté to remind her that the Empress Octavia could hound her to her death. But Nero, glancing over the suddenly tense group in the glade, pointed to the blond woman who was flirting with her two escorts, playing them off against each other.

"That one. She'll do. Send her over here. Who is she?"

"General Otho's wife." Acté went to the woman, who agreed and moved to Nero's side with a feline grace. She curled up in Nero's lap, shook out long, glossy yellow hair, and looked up at him with wondrous, oblique cat's eyes.

Still frightened at the danger she had barely missed, Serena hurried to the nearest tree, got behind it, and watched the approach of the young Octavia with her litter-bearer escort and two female slaves. Octavia had been walking with great dignity, but as she reached the glade, she began to run, until she was standing over her husband and his two women, brunette Acté and the blond wife of General Otho.

"There you sit, noble Caesar! Making love to my father's murderer. Show your face, you sinful creature."

The sinuous golden beauty pushed the hair out of her eyes and looked up at Octavia's severe, nerve-racked face, the face of a pretty girl haunted by personal tragedy.

"Sinful, your Majesty? We are but telling love tales. No harm done, surely."

Stunned at the impudence of the general's wife, and the

fact that she was not the woman Octavia expected to find there, the young empress gasped. "A trick! Or I have been lied to. Please, someone . . . lead me out of this place, this black hell of Tartarus!" Blindly she caught the hand of one of her slaves, who helped her away, while the crowd giggled and whispered at her retreating back.

Nero was on his feet now, but too late. He looked uncomfortable; yet he let her go, rushing back the way she had come, so rapidly she even outran her litter bearers.

Serena felt the heavy bark of the tree scratching her cheek and was glad of this little prick of pain. She had thought for a short time that she might be sick. Everything in her past life revolted at this treatment of the unfortunate young empress. She was still hating the entire night, including her part in it, and determined to return to Rome in the morning, when Acté spoke to her.

"My lady, shall I show you the way back to your litter?"

"Thank you. As soon as possible."

Behind them in the glade they heard a sudden burst of tinkling laughter. General Otho's blond wife was amused at something Nero had said. Curious about the woman, Serena asked Acté, "Who is the general's wife? Has she been around the court very long? I don't remember seeing her before."

Acté was subdued. Perhaps she didn't like the woman, which was odd, because Acté had no enemies. "She is new on the Palatine. The general is in Gaul now, fighting the insurgents. Her name is Poppaea Sabina."

Serena felt the chill of the night, which reminded her that this was winter, after all.

"May we go now? At once?"

Acté sighed. "Of course." She looked back once, murmuring so softly that Serena scarcely heard her, "I have lost him . . ."

"Ridiculous. He is much too intelligent to trade you for a woman like that."

Acté tried to smile. "I will never stop loving him. Never. As long as he lives. You see, he doesn't know it, but he needs me."

# 15

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Empress Agrippina stood by the marble balustrade staring over the brightness of the bay. She turned as Serena was announced, waved away the usher who brought her, and came toward Serena.

"My child, I am told you wish to return to Rome."

Serena bowed respectfully. After her own near-disaster at Nero's orgy the previous night, she hadn't the courage to try to prove by her manner that she was Agrippina's social equal.

"With your Majesty's approval."

"My reluctant permission," Agrippina said gently, "but not my approval. You have scarcely been here twenty-four hours." She hesitated, took Serena's arm, and walked with her into the peristyle. "I am much older than my poor stepson, as I need not remind you, and I too may have a will for you to transcribe."

With the gaudy winter light playing over her face, she seemed to have aged perceptibly since her bitter encounter with her son the previous day. Surprised and touched by the empress's kindness, Serena was reminded that Agrippina had been responsible for her trip to Baiae and that it would be extremely discourteous, if not lese majesty, to return to Rome without having satisfied the empress's requirements. At the same time, she was fully aware of the danger from Octavia if she stayed. Octavia, with her apparently excellent spy system, would soon suspect, and perhaps use, the tie between Serena and Tigellinus.

"If your Majesty wishes it, then the Lady Maxima will permit me to stay and oblige you."

Agrippina patted her shoulder in thanks and sighed. "In view of the danger surrounding me at every turn, I think it wise to make my will." She seemed to consider some dim memory of long ago, and ventured after a thoughtful pause,

"It was in this very area, not far from Naples, where my fortune was told when I was a girl. I never forgot it."

Serena asked curiously, "Do you believe in fortune-tellers, Majesty?"

Agrippina's deep-throated chuckle was at once a cynic's answer and a mockery of herself.

"Who is to say? I believed then because I heard what I wanted to hear. In part. I had wandered off into town from the villa with my two younger sisters. They are both gone now, thanks to our beloved brother Gaius. *Caligula*, everyone called him." She uttered the nickname through her teeth.

"Did the fortune-teller foresee anything that came to pass?"

Agrippina removed her arm from Serena's shoulder, which was a relief. The vestal had found it oppressive. The empress did not seem to be looking at her audience but at some remembrance of that warm, drowsy summer day so long ago.

"At that time, as I must tell you, Lady Serena, we were living on the charity of our grand uncle, the Emperor Tiberius. There were many candidates to rule the empire; so when this fortune-teller made her prediction, my sisters took it as pure fantasy. She told me that I would face two roads one day and must choose the road and the destiny I preferred. I would be an emperor's wife and rule my husband, or an emperor's mother and rule the world."

Serena looked at her in astonishment. "She saw the future!"

"Ah, but there was a hook in it. If I chose to rule the world, I would die at the hands of the . . . the tool through whom I ruled." Serena started, uncomfortably aware that the empress's dark eyes were fixed upon her. "Do you understand what that means, my dear? That I would meet death through the instrumentality of my own son."

For her life's sake Serena could not admit she understood. She moistened her lips, remarked with a pretense at cheerful stupidity, "That was the false part. Every prediction has a false part, something that turns around the prophecy, like the Delphic Oracle who gives both good and bad, so one never knows whether to listen or to laugh." By the time she finished, she almost believed it herself. She blurted out, "What did you say to the fortune-teller?"

Agrippina smiled at the proud, ambitious girl she had been.

"I said, 'Let my child but be emperor and I'll chance the rest.' "

With an effort, Serena restrained a shudder. She could not think of a thing to say, either in denial or in praise of the empress's courage.

"Well, well, my child, I have upset you, and that was far from my intention." Her sudden laughter was almost as alarming to Serena as the tale of the fortune-teller. "The gods are my witness. I have no one I can trust, no one I can turn to, in whom I can confide . . . or who will confide in me."

"But, your Majesty, that cannot be true. Forgive me! But it cannot be true. Everyone in Rome loves . . ." She had to change that. She caught the curl of the empress's lips. "Everyone admires you more than any other woman in Roman history." Holy Vesta! Serena thought. Last night I was cheering up Nero. Today I am cheering his mother. I, a mere vestal, cheering the two most powerful people in the world. It was absurd. And ironic.

"Then you will stay, Lady Serena?" the empress persisted. "We have many amusements here. Are you a betting woman?"

Surprised at this turn in the peculiar conversation, and wondering uneasily why it seemed so important to the empress that she remain, Serena confessed with some annoyance, "I have a few sesterces, enough to buy trinkets for my vestal sisters. Hardly enough to gamble with. I have wagered on the races at the Circus Maximus, of course, for small amounts. I don't understand."

"Because we have some entertainment today that I believe will make you glad you pleased me by remaining. My son is fond of athletic sports, as you know. And my old and loyal friend Tigellinus likewise has had considerable experience with a chariot and four. But perhaps you are not familiar with Philip's past."

In a voice devoid of color Serena admitted, "I know little of the prefect's private life beyond what is universally known."

*That he was your lover for many years before your marriage to the emperor!*

"Do have some of these dates. They are delicious. Philip orders them brought across the Mediterranean by the fastest galleys, even in midwinter, when none of the ships except our pirate patrols are out. They are one of his little tributes to me, in memory of the years when we starved in exile on the

Isle of Pandateria." She peered into Serena's face, very close, as if she were nearsighted like her son. "Taste one. Let me choose . . . this. A plump, delicious fruit, is it not?" She put it between Serena's lips.

"My dear, thoughtful Philip," she went on. "Only last night he turned to me and said in that tender voice he can achieve at special moments: 'I adore you when you sleep in my arms. . . .' Oh, but pardon me. My memories carried me away. I had forgotten who you are. I hope I haven't shocked you, my child. I know the purity of the vestal mind."

Helpless to escape these sickening reminiscences, if they were true, Serena welcomed the approach of Agrippina's usher, closely followed by Nero's soldierly confidant, Burrus, with two slaves bearing a large iron-bound coffer. Burrus saluted.

"Majesty, the emperor has sent me along to you with a peace offering. He deeply regrets any misunderstanding that may have occurred yesterday."

Serena bowed, hoping to use this interruption as a cloak for her departure, but Agrippina, with a fixed smile, held her wrist.

"No, Lady Serena. We have more to discuss. Now, then, what is this all about, Burrus? I almost said *friend* Burrus, but that time is gone. Today you cluster around the sunrise, not the sunset."

Burrus was brusque. He had never learned the nuances of elegant society. "Empress, you set me a task many years ago. To guard and advise your son. I hope I'll never fail. He wants you to have these jewels for your use. They belong to the treasury of Rome."

Serena gasped as Burrus flipped the hasp of the coffer's lock and opened the lid. She had never seen such a collection of metal objects studded with gems. At first glance their dark, unpolished look made them appear to be the worthless stage properties used in an amphitheater, but she realized the dulled gold and silver of necklaces, armlets, and bracelets made the precious rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and amethysts no less valuable. All they needed was a careful washing and polishing. The rings were harder to find. They were in their own small coffer against a setting of imperial red velvet.

While Burrus stood grimly smiling, ready for the empress's reaction to match Serena's wide-eyed amazement, Agrippina threw an uneaten date into the hastily cupped hands of her

usher and reached into the coffer's tray. She brought out a diadem made for a head as large as Nero's, although no emperor in Rome ever wore such ostentatious signs of a ruler. After all, the power of Rome was still loudly, if a bit untruthfully, held to exist in the famed SPQR—the Senate and the people of Rome. But Caligula had worn such oriental signs of power, and Serena, remembering Nero's great emerald as well as the rings on his fingers, suspected he also would like to have worn such dramatic signs of power.

Agrippina held up the diadem, turned it over in her long fingers, then, with the utmost contempt, dropped it onto the precious pile. It struck upon the other heavy jewelry with a dull, clanking sound.

"My dear Burrus, go back to your master and tell him he cannot give me what is mine by right of my position."

For once Burrus found himself humiliated. He couldn't believe he had heard her correctly. He stared at her, his eyes almost vanishing beneath his bushy eyebrows. She looked majestic, unshakable. Finally he shrugged, motioned the slaves to pick up the coffer. At once Agrippina stepped forward, spread her hand over the coffer.

"Come, Burrus, you are grown older, but has your hearing gone with your hair? I said these are the property of the empress of Rome. Leave them. And leave me!"

Serena's own bitter jealousy, her fear that the empress told the truth about "last night with Philip," didn't blind her to the fact that Agrippina could be greedy and majestic at the same time. It was an art cultivated through over forty years of matching her powers against a hostile world. She had managed to overawe Burrus, who was not easily impressed. He gave up now, saluting her, then bowing to Serena, whose position he recognized by her hairstyle and her gown, and left the peristyle, followed less rapidly by the two slaves.

Agrippina laughed. This victory had put her in a better humor. She ran the necklaces through her fingers absently while she spoke to Serena:

"As I started to say, there is to be a chariot race this afternoon at a track my son has had leveled and resanded since the early-December rains. He and Tigellinus and several of the better horsemen are going to compete. You must stay to cheer on one of the charioteers. Anyone you like. Appius Claudius Junior is a likely young fellow. Or even Nero. You might wish to become his partisan."

Anyone, in fact, but Philip Tigellinus, Serena thought, reading the woman's mind. She was more than ever anxious to be gone from this place.

"No, Majesty. I'm sorry, but the senior vestal—"

"So dangerous," Agrippina said softly. "It requires the utmost skill to race with all one's heart, and still to lose deliberately, by a hair."

"To lose? But why should a charioteer deliberately try to lose?"

"My dear, you don't know my son if you think he will be fond of a man who beats him. At anything. It is the same with his singing—dreadful habit he has gotten into, this singing and reciting. But certainly he doesn't intend to lose a race before all his friends at court."

It was true. Serena had very little doubt of it. "Are the racers liable to be hurt?"

Agrippina's eyebrows raised like two heavy dark wings.

"Why else will the arena be filled? Everyone from southern Italy will be here, all the patricians who are athletically inclined, and the commoners, the plebeians, of course, from Naples, Pompeii, Herculaneum. I understand a group may arrive from Brundisium, but they are expected to be too late. You must remain. In fact, we may find it difficult to collect an escort for your journey before the race is over."

In spite of her suspicion that the relationship between Agrippina and Philip was far from over, Serena was terrified to think of him risking his life while she rode comfortably back to Rome. If something happened and he was hurt, she would not know for days. Even if he came out of the race unharmed, she would have no way of learning about it, so that her trip home would be wretched, filled with her fears for him.

"If your Majesty wishes it."

"I do."

Serena shrugged, bowed, and upon being freed of Agrippina's oppressive hand, she hurried back to the spacious room assigned to her by the empress. She found Hagar busy packing the box of Serena's clothing and travel items, including some uneaten cakes of the bread whose grain was ground and baked by the sacred hands of a vestal.

"Hard as rocks by now," Serena commented in a bad and nervous humor. "Why do you save it?"

"The goddess would appreciate our respecting it. And

besides, you never know. Might be handy. You can always dip it in hot water or mulled wine."

Serena went to the big window embrasure overlooking the windy bay and—a little to the right—the empress's terrace, where Agrippina was walking up and down with her hands clasped. She too was nervous and in a bad humor.

"My lady, you'd best let me dress you for the journey."

"There'll be no journey today."

Hagar raised her head sharply. She guessed at once who was back of the change in plan.

"She wants you here. I wonder why."

Serena drummed her fingernails on the stonework under her hand. "Not for any good reason, I'll wager." Hagar started to say something, but Serena motioned her to silence. She had seen a shadow fall aslant the long terrace. Two seconds later a tall man in a black tunic and cloak stepped out on the terrace behind the empress. Serena tensed to face the sight of their embrace. The man was Tigellinus.

He saluted in a military fashion. Serena couldn't hear what they said, but Agrippina went to him, placed her hands on either side of his neck, and kissed him on the lower half of his cheek. Almost his jawline, Serena thought scornfully with all the pride of a virgin whose deflowering has made her an authority.

"I could do better than that," she muttered, to the puzzlement of Hagar, and then looked back in a hurry, wildly anxious to see and analyze Philip's reaction. It told her nothing except that he was not being demonstrative. He fastened his fingers on Agrippina's shoulders, a gesture Serena remembered vividly, and asked her something. Agrippina answered him, and the look on her face transformed the dangerous Medusa to the tender, dark beauty Philip must have loved when they were young. Serena couldn't make out his own expression, so she had no sure knowledge of whether he was moved by this revelation.

They talked several minutes, with Serena's cheek pressed tight against the side of the stone window embrasure, as she listened, but her efforts were wasted. She heard nothing.

Finally Philip moved Agrippina out of his way, gently but with a certain decisive action. He did not bother to salute, but left her alone on the terrace. Serena ducked inside just an instant before Agrippina looked over at her window, then, in

a pensive mood, returned to her study of the choppy winter sea.

Almost immediately there was a sharp knock on the door that opened into the big pillared hall. Hagar gave a nervous yelp, which Serena almost echoed, though she knew it must be Philip. She was torn by conflicting desires. She wanted to see him, to judge his feelings as he looked at her and touched her, but it was now obvious Agrippina had sent him to her, and she hated him for that.

When Hagar opened the door and he came in with that confident stride, hands outstretched, and the dear, warm smile she had never seen directed at anyone but herself, she wanted to run and be embraced by those arms, even—as now—when a dagger was laced into the leather armlet above his left wrist. Just in time she remembered Agrippina's words: "that tender voice he can achieve at special moments." Yes. And the smile. Serena was not the only one to whom he had spoken with a special gentleness and smiled in a special way.

He spoke Serena's name, reached for her hands. She put them behind her and said in a pretense at flippancy, "Hail, Prefect. I am told you are going to race today. Are you here to give me tickets? We vestals always receive very special seats, you know."

Both Hagar and Tigellinus stared at her. Hagar didn't like what she saw, though she suspected the reason, and the prefect couldn't guess the reason but obviously continued to like what he saw.

"You have a dangerous sparkle, august lady. How many other Serenas have you hidden from the world?"

This increased the sparkle of her anger. "Take care, Prefect. I doubt if the empress sent you here to say quite all that."

He dropped his hands, glanced at Hagar. "What is it? What has happened?"

Before Hagar could grumble out some vague excuse, Serena cut in. "You were sent here by the empress, weren't you? I saw her give you your orders."

After a silence Serena found more uncomfortable than any she had ever known, Tigellinus laughed. For some reason which she couldn't guess, he seemed pleased.

"Of course she sent me to you! Do you think I would compromise your position, august lady, sneaking in to see you by stealth? Every slave in the household would be reporting to

her on the instant." He piloted Serena across the room by the shoulders, a masculine, forceful gesture she would have loved if he hadn't treated Agrippina the same way. "Now, see here!" he began.

She cut him off. "All this is unnecessary, Prefect," she told him with a bright, glittering smile, and turned to Hagar. "Wait for me in the atrium." When the old woman had gone with half-audible grumbling, Serena continued to Philip, "I have been ordered to show myself at Caesar's little made-over arena. If it weren't treason to the emperor, I would say you have my best wishes. Will you be wearing the empress's colors?"

She thought he would shake her, but though he frowned, he also laughed in exasperation and hugged her to him in spite of what he considered Serena's maddening behavior.

"My darling, you are jealous!"

"Don't call me that—darling. Don't even think it. Besides, vestals have nothing to be jealous of." But she couldn't bring herself to repulse him. He cupped her head under his chin, caressing her hair with his free hand. He reasoned with Serena as with a child. "The empress asked me to persuade you to stay."

"But why? She doesn't like me. I can feel it."

"She has some wild notion that Nero may try to kill her, and she thinks while a vestal is present, he won't dare. He is, after all, a religious man."

That was true. She remembered how quickly Nero had apologized to her for inviting her last night. He had said he didn't want Vesta against him. She looked up.

"Would he possibly kill his mother?"

Philip reasoned with her very quietly. "Never. Why should he? What would he gain but the hatred of the world? He has the power now. He is happy. He is even going off to Greece to sing in some worldwide music contests. Believe me, he wants his mother alive. I told Agrippina as much. Naturally, when she asked me to see you, I leaped at the chance. Will you come to Nero's racing circus today?"

She shrugged, pretending an indifference she was far from feeling. "I have no choice, it seems."

"*Carissima. My darling!*" He raised Serena's head by his bent forefinger and touched her lips with his. She couldn't help herself. She returned the rising passion of his kiss with an intensity that made her dizzy, as if she would draw into

her own bloodstream all his power and strength, and make him, as he had been that night at the inn, truly a part of her body.

Hagar coughed. She had returned to the room. They broke apart. Tigellinus said huskily, "Give me something of yours to carry today. I know. A ribbon." He unwound one of the pure white ribbons that held the plaits of her hair. With Serena and Hagar watching, he kissed it and tucked it inside the breast of his tunic under the hammered silver belt. Serena glanced at Hagar, unnerved at his unexpected sentimentality. Before he could say anything more, Hagar waved her hands to him wildly and slipped to the door with uncharacteristic silence.

She pulled the door open. The young Octavia almost fell into the room. It was calamitous to discover an empress eavesdropping. With great presence of mind Philip scolded Hagar.

"I said open the door, woman. I did not say you must knock down every passerby. . . . Your Majesty, let me help you. The woman was clumsy, but she meant no harm."

White-faced with her humiliation, Octavia straightened, thanked him briefly, and flashed a venomous look at both Hagar and Serena.

"It . . . it was careless of the woman. But I daresay she isn't used to being in the company of patricians." She had recovered somewhat and asked Philip with heavy sarcasm, "Were you asking Vesta's blessing for your race against my husband today?"

Philip was very much at ease. "If I were wise, I should do so. Actually, I was carrying out the Empress Agrippina's wishes. At her instruction I invited the august lady to watch the races. She has agreed."

He looked over Octavia's head, smiled at Serena, and gallantly escorted the empress to her apartments.

Sturdy Hagar was so unnerved she would have collapsed, but Serena caught her. The old woman cried brokenly, "I hate this place! There's evil here. Everywhere."

"I know. I know. We will return to Rome tomorrow."

"If they only let us go!" Hagar complained.

# 16

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Serena and Hagar were taken to the racecourse in one of Agrippina's own litters, and by the empress's bearers, so that it was difficult for the two of them to exchange confidences except in whispers. Serena knew, long before they reached the hastily erected rows of wooden benches in the elliptical shape of a typical racing arena, that Hagar was anxious about her and seriously worried over the love scene she had witnessed at Agrippina's villa.

"If anyone had seen you, my lady, I shudder! It mustn't happen again."

Serena said crisply, "It's not likely to. He and the empress were lovers long ago. And anyway, it will be years before I am free of my vows." She added with an indifferent wave of the hand, "If I choose to leave the order, which I am by no means certain I would do."

"I don't know. He seems a very determined man. I saw the way he looked at you. I don't think there's anything in this empress business. It's you he loves."

"Ha!" Serena scoffed, but with less conviction.

They had reached their destination, the big temporary archway made of wood, lava stone, and some cement, which was the most direct passage to the imperial box. This was in the center of the arena protected from rain and wind by the wide awnings. Serena could smell sulfur in the air and guessed that the site for the refurbishing of an old arena must be in the same general area as a famous volcanic outpouring of acrid yellow sulfur. Roman poets and old legends claimed these Phlegraean Fields were the entrance to the netherworld. When the god Pluto stole Persephone, the beautiful daughter of the harvest goddess, he sank with her to his home in Black Tartarus through one of the volcanic openings not far from this little elliptical depression in the fields. Serena looked around uneasily. Such tales might be the material of legend,

but who knew whether perhaps the god of the underworld did live below this ground where the crowd was pouring into the arena now.

The improvised imperial box, a series of chairs brought from the villas of Nero, Agrippina, and Seneca, wasn't yet filled, but those patricians not favored by the imperial regard, as well as the common citizens, slaves, and foreigners, were rapidly filling up the long, backless benches.

Among the patricians already in the imperial box were two groups isolated from each other at either end of the area. Beautiful, blond Poppaea Sabina, wife of General Otho, entertained her entourage with much laughter and good humor. The other group, small and quiet, surrounded dark Claudia Acté, who sat somewhat behind Serena and seldom spoke to her attendants. Her hands were laced together as if in prayer, and she seldom looked at the track below, though she nodded and smiled when Serena came in.

A young man made his way into the imperial box obviously to speak with Serena and Hagar. Handsome young Leander Pella's golden head shone in the sunlight, and Serena could understand his attraction for his cousin Damaris. He had obviously prospered recently. Diamonds flashed on his graceful hands as he waved them about while throwing a careless greeting here and there to people he seemed to know. His toga was spotless, not the grimy off-white or gray of so many citizens' togas which had been cleaned too often and too ineptly.

"If it isn't the august Lady Serena! Are you enjoying your stay here in decent weather for a change? Imagine what it must be like in Rome!"

She smiled politely. Then too, though she thought his charm overdone, it was unquestionably effective. "Very much, Leander. And I suppose you are remaining here because everyone's health is so bad. If there is any cause for illness among them, it seems to me it ought to be the richness of our diet here."

He laughed good-naturedly, standing before her in all his glory, very much aware that everyone in the vicinity was watching him.

"Their Majesties have been most kind. I've been called in on several occasions when old Xenophen wasn't wanted. Or needed. The Empress Octavia asked me in last evening to dose Prince Britannicus. She thought he might have been poi-

soned by Xenophen or his assistant." He sighed. "He wasn't, though."

She laughed, said softly, "You sound disappointed."

He glanced around to be certain they were not overheard, and hastily changed the subject.

"I see her Majesty's financial adviser, Pallas, is no longer sitting in the imperial box. Not surprising after what took place in Agrippina's villa yesterday afternoon. Have you heard?"

"Somewhat."

"The emperor really took over the imperial power, so they say." Apparently some thought struck him as funny. He was still laughing when he apologized to Serena, "Forgive me, august lady. You'll see how ridiculous it is when I tell you what went through my mind last night. I happened to be invited to Caesar's orgy. . . . Or do I mean his entertainment?"

Serena raised her eyes, aware of a slight premonition. "Please tell me. So we may all be amused."

"Well, I saw this beautiful creature all in gold, with her hair flowing about her. She was veiled. And for a minute—please don't be offended—I thought she was my good friend Lady Serena. Of course, I realized how absurd that was. The most pure, the most virginal of creatures. What would make such a creature dare the worst of fates for an evening of sexual orgy?"

"Well!" Hagar muttered, all hackles rising.

But Serena remained outwardly calm, answering his rhetorical question by a noncommittal "What, indeed?"

Leander brushed the windblown hair out of his eye. "I had better go and see if I can be of use to the empresses. The young one is very attractive when she smiles. Poor thing! She has little to smile about." He bent nearer Serena's ear. "You won't believe it, but she has hinted several times in my very presence that the emperor killed her father. That he has tried to kill her brother, as well."

"Clack-clack-clack! What a rattle he is!" Hagar whispered.

Serena agreed with her. She didn't know whether Nero had killed anyone or not, but there was no evidence as yet, and it seemed to her that someone was bound and determined to keep the gossip at a full boil.

"Leander, hadn't you better go and see the young empress? There she is, coming in now."

Leander whirled around. "Gods above! Is that Prince Bri-

tannicus with her? I told him to stay in bed today." He hurried off without a good-bye. Serena, thinking of Damaris and her passionate devotion to her cousin, didn't know whether to be glad for Damaris' future safety, or sad for the girl's lost illusions when she found out how shallow his feelings were.

The Empress Octavia received Leander graciously, and he joined her party, sitting just behind Britannicus, who was being unbearably fussed over with robes and cushions while everyone heard his complaints.

"You'll stifle me! I want to see the track. Don't let anyone tall sit in front of me. I won't drink that infernal barley water."

"Poor boy!" Hagar muttered. "It's hard to believe he's only a year or so younger than the emperor."

Leander leaned forward and spoke to Britannicus, pointing out Serena. The boy looked her way, nodded, and waved, whereupon Octavia slapped his hand and undoubtedly warned him against the vestal. Scowling, he sank back in his seat among blankets that threatened to shroud him.

The arrival of the Empress Agrippina with a dozen attendants aroused a buzz of gossip audible throughout the now crowded arena. She snubbed Poppaea Sabina, passing her as if she did not exist, though that lively young lady seemed undisturbed. By some shrewd manuever, Agrippina came to her seat at the center of the imperial box in the company of the six Armenian envoys, all fawning upon her as the font of all wisdom and power.

Serena couldn't help being amused. No one would keep Agrippina down, not even her powerful son.

"I must say, I admire that woman. She will do anything to get what she wants."

Hagar sniffed. "She may get more than she bargains for if she tries the emperor too much."

Serena's amusement was badly dampened.

A minute later she rose with the crowd as the trumpets shrilled over the sulfurous air, and four teams rode in through the makeshift triumphal entrance, the four riders magnificently poised with legs apart, balanced in their tiny, fragile racing chariots. Side by side, the sixteen horses pranced down the length of the course to the applause, the yells, and the wagers of the crowd.

There could be no doubt who received the most cheers, led with enormous gaiety by Poppaea Sabina and with a certain

quiet tension by Claudia Acté. Serena suspected that even if Nero had not been the emperor, he would have been the mob's favorite. His massive, muscular body was revealed by a short green tunic, the color of the mob's faction, whereas another patrician athlete, unknown to Serena, wore blue, the favorite of the court patricians, under the protective leather bindings over his breast and midsection. The Red had a few local supporters, mostly young and heavy bettors, but to Serena's ears Tigellinus, all in black and silver except for a wristband of white (her vestal ribbon), had no support, even from the White faction. He was a policeman. The crowd didn't forget that. The knowledge that he was alone and unsupported out there made him more dear to Serena. He paid no attention to the wild shouts which clearly showed the crowd's bias against him. He was probably used to it.

Nero, on the other hand, adored his popularity. He waved repeatedly to groups who screamed his name as he passed. Someone near Serena sent the word along that the emperor had insisted on taking the outside track for the procession. Later, during the race itself, this would be the least-favored position, since the innermost track next to the long spina dividing outward from homeward courses was considerably shorter. But during the procession, the charioteer on the outer track was nearer to his yelling, cheering supporters in the stands.

Serena stood up with the others as the procession passed the imperial box and the charioteers saluted. She knew Philip saw her. He held the lines in one hand and saluted with the other arm from whose wrist fluttered a white silk ribbon.

We understand each other, she thought, and glanced at Agrippina, who watched him with pride. She had every reason to suppose his straight-armed salute, like all the others, was addressed to herself in her imperial capacity.

There were not many senators in the stands. Most of that body considered such an athletic display by their emperor as the depth of degradation, a deliberate attempt to curry favor with the mob. The senators who had come sat stiffly in their togas, not rising to cheer, but staring at the sky with intensity. When the procession had passed twice and vanished beyond the triumphal entrance, these senatorial heads got together and buzzed away in agreement at the insult to the Roman eagles that they had just beheld.

So much wagering and shouting went on back and forth

along the precipitous mountain of stands paralleling the two lengths of the racecourse that Hagar complained, "We'll never hear the beginning of the race." She pointed to the eight stall doors, four of which held back the champing, chafing, eager teams from the starting line.

"We'll hear! No Roman would miss that." Serena had no sooner uttered this confident opinion than she nudged Hagar. Both turned to the center of the imperial box, where Agrippina stood up, a splendid figure in amethyst silk gown with a cloak spun of gold cloth. She raised a large gold-fringed white napkin.

Instantly the entire crowd became silent. A whisper could have been heard across the arena, but no one would dream of committing such a sacrilege. The empress let the big napkin fall. Seconds later, cutting into the eerie stillness, the trumpets shrilled out a deafening blast which announced the first race, the all-important race in which the emperor took part.

The crowd got to its feet as one man, no one shouting or crying out until the doors to the four stalls were flung open and the four teams plunged out onto the track. The horses, with their tails and manes clipped short, appeared more wildly eager than the charioteers, who presented a statuesque and graceful equilibrium as their racing cars bounded over the freshly sanded course, past the lowered starting rope.

By the usual gamble of shaking colored balls out of a large urn, the Green—Nero—had won the favored inner place along the spina which divided the outward and homeward tracks. It was by no means certain that the team having this track would hold it long, but if the charioteer did manage to keep the position, he would almost certainly win. Nero's broad, fleshy countenance looked tense, nervous, almost terrified as he urged his team of four bays along the length of the spina, trying to monopolize this shorter track while they avoided the deadly danger of being driven into the stone wall of the spina itself. The Blue had won the place next to the inner track; then came Tigellinus, representing the White faction; and the Red, a vigorous young Syrian, won the least-favored outside track.

As the teams spurted out across the wide track in the first manuevers of the race, Tigellinus made no effort to gain the spina position. Serena had eyes only for his tall, black-clad figure as he rode the rocky, bumpy track with what appeared to be effortless ease. His team, black stallions from Sicily,

looked wild and undisciplined, with only a slight pressure from Tigellinus directing their fragile lines in his hand, with the ends wound around his waist. Could he handle the team at a critical moment? Serena had seen all too often in the Circus Maximus the hideous spectacle of the charioteer dragged out of the chariot during a pileup of his team because he could not cut himself loose from those lines fast enough.

Others in the crowd around Serena were already arguing Tigellinus' technique, which looked so deceptively easy, almost negligent. But Serena knew enough about races to guess that the Red and the Blue, who were frantically trying to urge their teams toward the spina and the short inside track, might be expending all their energy too soon.

Gamblers in the crowd were having trouble. The odds favoring Nero had grown prohibitive as the first marble egg was dropped at the end of the first lap and the four teams whirled around the upper end of the spina again in a blinding spray of sand. Serena stood on her toes trying to see over the heads of two of Nero's wild supporters on the bench below. Nero had lost a little of his first impetus by this time. Terribly conscious of the Blue's snorting, nervous team hard on the rear of his bouncing chariot, he plunged onward, now aware of the Red coming up fast on his right.

Philip Tigellinus had the wide outer track to himself. The odds against the White were so great that everyone was startled when a woman called, "A thousand denarii on the White!"

A dozen voices chimed in to take the wager, and Serena turned, curious to find out the identity of Tigellinus' staunch supporter. It was the Empress Agrippina. Serena was shamed by her own failure to declare her faith in the man she loved, but the few sesterces Lady Maxima had given her for emergencies could hardly be squandered in gambling.

With two laps gone, the Red pulled hard across the track from the outer rim, hoping to crowd the emperor's team as far as he could without committing the diplomatic disaster of wrecking his emperor. But he began to drop back, having lost more than he gained by that first reckless crossing. The Blue's team seemed to be breathing down Nero's neck, but Serena thought the Blue team too had begun to look winded.

The surprising result of the close, furious race between Nero, the Blue, and the Red was that few people except Ser-

ena, and perhaps the empress, saw how Philip's wild black four began to come up on the outer track. Neither winded nor panicked like the three teams close to the spina, the blacks seemed to breathe fire in and out of their flaring nostrils. Something had happened to the hand controlling their lines. Philip reached out over the frail chariot rail, calling to the blacks in a Sicilian dialect, while his easy grip tightened, became steel-hard. Serena considered his black-and-silver tunic, his dark head and profile. He looked like an extension of those fierce black beasts flying over the tracks. He was a fifth to that wild, determined four.

Others began to notice at last what was happening. Timid voices were heard asking odds on Philip, and the betting stewards kept busily opening and closing their wax tablets as they recorded the bets pouring in so fast even their skilled shorthand was hard put to keep up the pace of the betting.

Serena screamed Tigellinus' colors once, forgetting the danger. Some others, greatly daring, did likewise, but Hagar nudged Serena to silence. The Red now drew back, unable to keep pace beside Nero, who urged his own bay team on to their physical limits. His face was flushed, his eyes bulging as his chariot and four swung around the spina and passed the imperial box. The fifth marble egg had been dropped into the urn. The sixth lap began. Tigellinus made his move as the three teams on the inner track fought it out, the Blue trying to move up beside Nero's four, which still hugged the spina wall. The Blue and the Red were fighting it out. Neither could move out in front of Nero's team. They could only hope to come in a head behind the emperor, which would be the intelligent, diplomatic maneuver. Neither the Blue nor the Red considered Tigellinus and his fiery black stallions, but Nero cast a quick look beyond the heads of the Red charioteer's team, then bent over the chariot rail.

For the first time the Red charioteer noted the Sicilian juggernaut thundering across the path of his team's right trace-mate. Trying to cut away his right tracemate and yokemate from the stallions' path, he began to make mistakes in a game where any mistake could cost a life. Behind him the Blue came roaring up to the tailpiece of his chariot, trying to force a way between the Red and Nero, who still hugged the inner course.

The vigorous young Red began to lose his supreme self-confidence. From Tigellinus on his right he was being

crowded closer to the emperor's team, but Nero would never yield on his left, and when he reined in to drop back, the Blue couldn't control his plunging horses. There was no time to swerve or fall back. They climbed blindly over the tailpiece of the Red chariot, caught the fragile little car in their hooves, and in seconds the Blue's team was rearing out of control; the Red, closely tangled in the reins around his waist, spun out of the chariot and was lost from the sight of the screaming crowd under the jagged broken edges of the chariot and the hooves of the Blue's maddened team.

Watching the debacle from the stands, Serena was too hoarse to scream. She felt shaken and weak, sick to her stomach. And guilty. Because her first thought after the horror of the pileup was to thank the gods it wasn't Philip.

Without looking back, Nero sailed on, lashing his four bays to even greater speed. Out of the corner of his eye Tigellinus had seen the smash of the Red's chariot, and the tangling of the two maddened teams. He swerved, pulled hard on the lines guiding the left tracemates and yokemates of his fiery blacks. His body had drawn so far back that Serena, who was watching with her hands locked until they pained her, felt he must fall back onto the track at any second. The team swung out and around the pileup, where track supporters of the Red and Blue factions, helped by the surviving Blue charioteer, were already dragging off the dead charioteer and releasing the live from the dead horses.

The Sicilian black team was so powerful and so fast, even its brief delay did not give Nero more than a few seconds' advantage. Hearing the storm of hoofbeats, the rattle of Tigellinus' flying chariot, Nero glanced over his shoulder. Half the circus could see his face, which was pitted by sand, stones, and fury. His temper, quick to flare, quick to die, was as unruly as his wild red hair. He had acquired the habit of winning in whatever field he attempted. Here was a threat to his pride. He lashed the bays again, but they had already extended themselves, and all the time the black juggernaut was closing the gap between them.

The Red charioteer's gory death had been quickly forgotten by the throng. Already a strong-lunged minority was beginning to yell encouragement to Tigellinus, and the White faction, previously silenced by the unpopularity of their charioteer, rose up to wave white pennons, white napkins, handkerchiefs, and ribbons. Both the Red and the Blue fac-

tions, forgetting their own losses, now joined in support of either Nero or Philip, so that the air was full of screams: "One hundred on the Green!" "Seventy on the Green!" "One hundred on the White!"

The sixth marble egg dropped. The two teams swung around the spina, beginning their last lap of the race. The shouting of the crowd drowned even the rattle of wheels, the shriek of tortured axles, the thunder of the horses' hooves as they tore down the track before turning at the end of the spina for the homeward stretch and victory.

Everyone heard Nero's shout: "The gods with me! The gods with the Green!"

But a few, among them Serena and the Empress Agrippina, began to doubt that the gods were going to be with the emperor today. It occurred to Serena that the worst thing Philip could do was to win from his friend and patron: yet she shared the thrill of pride and excitement at Philip's magnificent display of skill.

Faster and faster the four Sicilian blacks seemed to fly over the sand, until they were neck and neck with Nero's bays. The emperor bent far over the chariot rail. His whip cracked repeatedly over the backs of the bays as he shouted his prayer: "Great Apollo! With me!"

Tigellinus made no prayers, no sound. With one leg balanced against the chariot rail and the other behind it rooted to the bouncing floor, he guided the team by signals sent over the frail lines.

The two teams swung around the spina, starting up the last stretch, still neck and neck. Although they had the longer, outside track, the black team managed to keep abreast of the bays, but ahead loomed the wreckage of the Red and Blue chariots, still being dragged off the track. Belatedly, Nero saw the wreckage. With the wreckage piled against the spina in the direct path of his left tracemate, and Philip's fierce blacks on the right track, he saw disaster ahead and panicked. He would not slacken his speed and lose the race. He signaled the bays sharply toward the right, to crowd into Philip's team.

All of the arena saw the Sicilian's instant reaction. Leaning almost double over his wild, racing team, he gave a peculiar, ear-piercing whistle. Barely averting disaster, his left tracemate led the swift wheel and turn of the team, out of the way of Nero's bays, which swung onward, cutting out in front of

the blacks, racing for the finish line and the laurel wreath of victory.

So tense she ached in every bone, Serena watched Tigellinus draw up beside the emperor, and having gradually calmed the blacks, he leaped down from the chariot, put his team in the hands of two trainers, and strode over to the victor's circle to congratulate Nero. The emperor, though breathless, disheveled, and pitted with sand, had never been happier. His laurel wreath sat crookedly over one eye, but he ignored this. His reddened face looked like one enormous grin as he embraced Tigellinus. In Serena's anxious eyes the man she loved shared some of Nero's enthusiasm. It seemed clear he had known how it would end, that Nero must win, and he returned the embrace, apparently following this with remarks on the emperor's skill.

The two men strolled toward the imperial box, across the track, which now swarmed with well-wishers. Empress Agrippina had broken away from those around her, who were busy paying off bets to each other. Only Octavia and Britannicus had not wagered. Octavia was too disgusted, hating both the winner and second-place winner, while Britannicus huddled in his blankets, complaining about the cold wind that had started up.

Agrippina moved rapidly down to the wooden wall, where she called, "Congratulations, Philip! That last brilliant maneuver saved my son's life."

The shout was audible to Serena, who caught her breath. She had a suspicion that this was not a remark calculated to please the emperor. Had the empress said it deliberately? Nero pretended not to hear his mother. He went on enthusiastically describing his own various maneuvers on the track. Among the crowd were dozens wearing the colors of the Red and Blue factions. One of the Reds, a nervous, thin young man decked in red ribbons from hair to sandals, pushed his way through the well-wishers waving a huge red pennon in each hand. When he reached the emperor and Tigellinus, he screamed over all the other sounds, "You killed our champion! Murderer!"

The two red pennons dropped to the sand. A small dagger gleamed in each hand. He raised both daggers, thrust them toward the emperor. Suddenly Philip was between the two men. During the brief scuffle, no one in the stands could see what had happened. The shouts and screams were shut off as

if by a giant hand. A silence of horror and suspense settled over the arena. Then the onlookers on the field scattered. Philip had the attacker's two wrists in his grasp, twisting hard. The daggers dropped to the sand, and the maddened Red supporter went down on his knees, sobbing hysterically. "All my money. . . . Every sesterce on the Red . . . all gone. . . ."

Unhurt, Nero raised his arm, signaled to the nearest Praetorian guards, who lifted the sobbing man and dragged him away. It was Agrippina's sharp, agonized cry which warned Serena that Tigellinus had taken the force of the two dagger thrusts, one in his upper thigh and the other between his ribs. He didn't fall, but it was Nero who provided the shoulder and the arm to help him as he limped across the track to salute the empress.

Frantic, Serena tried to move, to run down toward the track wall, but Hagar held her back, whispering, "You want to die, my lady? You want to be buried alive? Then hush! Be calm."

# 17

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There seemed to be no way in which Serena could go to the aid of the injured man. She had to be content with Philip's glance upward over the many benches, as if to greet her. Protesting impatiently, he had been forced onto a litter by the emperor, who walked beside the litter to a barracks room at the north end of the area, just behind the entrance archway and the eight team stalls.

When Serena asked where they would take him, the man in front of her snorted at a memory. "I was there myself last month, to see a wounded charioteer of the Blues. It stank of horse dung and urine. If the prefect wasn't sick before, he'll be sick after. Saved Caesar's life, though. I'll give him that."

"He won't be in the barracks for long," his companion surmised. "See who's on her way to throw her weight around."

The Empress Agrippina's litter was already carrying her down the length of the track toward the entrance gates. Serena watched her.

"I'd give my soul to be Agrippina at a time like this," she told Hagar, who shook her arm in angry fear. "She can order them to let her see him."

"Don't even think such things, my lady. We'd best be going now."

"Not until I find out how badly hurt he is."

But Hagar was already tugging her along, out of the imperial box toward the exit stairs. In her heart Serena knew Hagar was right, but her thoughts were in turmoil. How badly hurt was Tigellinus? Could such a strong and powerful body be drained of blood by two desperate sword thrusts? There was no way of knowing how serious the attack had been. As if reading her thoughts, Hagar reminded her, "Remember. He walked across the arena. He didn't want to take the litter. It was the emperor who insisted."

Serena tried to console herself with a brief memory. "He looked at me."

"Silence, my lady! Someone may hear you."

There were mintues—or rather seconds, for she was basically a levelheaded woman—when Serena hardly cared whether anyone heard her declarations of love. She had never been in love before. The marvel of it was something she wanted to shout to the world.

Claudia Acté met her outside the arena, where six litter bearers and a lictor in the household of Agrippina were waiting to carry Serena back to the empress's villa.

"What a brave thing we've seen! Caesar will bring the whole empire to heal the prefect. After all, Tigellinus saved his life. Nero will never forget that."

Serena whispered, "If I could only know how that brave prefect is getting along! I feel so useless, Acté. Do you understand what I am feeling?"

"Only too well."

The break in her voice made Serena look at her. She couldn't mistake the suffering in Acté's strained voice.

"I'm sorry. Of course you understand. Thank you. You are the one friend I have in all this heady imperial splendor."

Acté smiled faintly. "No. You have other friends. Caesar, for one. He would help you in any way. You know that. In my situation . . . Lady Serena, no one is so despised as an ex-slave who has risen in the world. But I am depressing you, and I don't wish to. . . . Farewell, my lady."

Serena would have liked to exchange long confidences with her, but Acté was already gone, walking rapidly toward the litter waiting with Nero's household slaves. Frail and slender, she seemed so completely alone in a hostile world. Troubled as Serena was, her heart went out to Acté, who could never hope her relationship with the man she loved would be legitimized.

When Serena reached the empress's villa she couldn't be still. She walked up and down the room until Hagar demanded that she go elsewhere. To the baths, perhaps, or out onto the terrace to watch the boats on the choppy waters of the sea.

"But please, my lady; no more pacing. You drive me to the brink of Tartarus."

Serena shrugged elaborately, admitted to herself that the old woman had grounds for complaint.

"Very well. If I can't even count on your company when I need it . . . *Very well!*" She stormed out, doubly angry because she was at fault.

The empress's private baths were very nearly as complex as one of Rome's great public baths, where, it was boasted, one could spend a lifetime among the various hot, cold, and luke-warm bathing facilities, the trignon ball courts, the libraries, and the shops. The admission was often the lowest copper coin, and a plebeian had as much right to enjoy these wonders as any aristocrat. Since most slaves in the Roman households rarely had more than a few hours' services to perform each day, they too were to be found in the baths, provided they could pay the pittance for admission. Not a difficult matter for any enterprising slave.

When Serena stalked through the maze of corridors toward the baths on the west end of the villa, she hoped to enjoy alone the soothing waters and pounding of her naked flesh by the slave women skilled at massage. She had already entered the dressing room, and a stone-faced woman, obviously belonging to Agrippina, had stripped off her gown and shift when the Empress Octavia came into the dressing room. Her delicate face looked mottled, as if she had been crying. She stopped abruptly, and her eyes seemed opaque with the weight of her hatred and fear when she saw Serena standing nude, with her hair tumbled down about her bare shoulders, and her flesh gleaming like polished alabaster in the light of the oil lamp boats.

"You! They didn't tell me." The young empress flung an angry question over her shoulder. "Why didn't you tell me someone was using the baths?"

Seeing those furious eyes absorbing her nakedness from head to toe, Serena reached for the robe the masseuse held out. Securely wrapped, she made a slight sketch of a bow.

"Forgive me, Empress. If you wish to be alone, I can come later."

For some reason, Octavia was taken aback. Flustered, she borrowed a handkerchief from her body slave and stared over at Serena. "I . . . I . . . don't wish to interfere with the Lady Agrippina's guests. I'll come back later."

"Please, your Majesty, I only came here because . . . I'll dress and leave." Serena nodded to the masseuse, who clapped her hands, and two silent, scared young slave girls

appeared in the doorway with perfumed oils, unguents, towels, and the sharp-bladed strigils.

"No. The august lady's clothing," the masseuse ordered, but was countermanded by the young empress, who sniffed, stiffened her back, and said with hysterical gaiety, "We shall bathe together. Perhaps we may become friends. Who knows, Lady Serena?"

"Your Majesty is gracious." All the same, Serena kept her body tightly wrapped until she could be sure Octavia was sincere. Although she welcomed this unexpected change of mood in one she knew to be her enemy, Serena could not imagine what had caused it, and still didn't trust it.

With a modesty and shyness quite unlike most Roman patricians, Octavia was at great pains to keep her disrobing process hidden from Serena. The empress remained behind the screen of her two body slaves and refused all help from the masseuse. She sent a message across the room to Serena, who stood by the closed doors to the scalding heat of the caldarium, waiting on Octavia's pleasure.

"The empress suggests you go into the bath first, august lady."

Half-expecting some wild, hysterical attack while she was naked and defenseless in the steamy caldarium, Serena obeyed, but with her fists clenched.

Serena had intended to take the tepidarium, the pleasant lukewarm pool, first, but was hustled into the caldarium instead. The hot bath had never struck Serena as sinister before. She didn't like to have her fair skin reddened and dried out by the steamy heat of the pool, but it was customary, and she followed the custom. Unlike the larger tepidarium with its movable ceiling so one could enjoy sunny skies, the only advantage of the hot bath was that it lulled one to a drowsy half-sleep. Not the best attitude, Serena thought, for a woman fearing personal attack.

The hot room was lighted by oil-burning lamps whose smoke mingled with the steam and made Serena sneeze. She spent very little time in the caldarium but called for a wrap and hurried to the spacious, sunny pool in the tepidarium. A masseuse followed, but Serena waved her away and plunged into the pool, relieved of pressures and worries by the soothing wash of the waters over her heated body. She swam the length of the pool, grabbed the mosaic strip along the marble edge of the pool, and took a long breath.

As she turned and swam back, the long, fine strands of her hair slapped wetly across her face, and with a shrug she freed her cheek and mouth of the tickling hair. At the same time, she pictured Philip's hand touching her face, her hair.

The suspense of not knowing how serious his injury was suddenly hit her. She wanted to be with him. She couldn't bear to think of him suffering at the hands of strangers . . . and Agrippina, whom he had loved so long.

She exclaimed painfully, "Oh!" and swallowed a mouthful of water. She was still choking when the young empress splashed into the pool and swam to her. She wouldn't have believed Octavia could look at her with that concern and soft, warm humanity.

"Are you ill? May I help you?"

Serena tried to speak, failed. Her hands fluttered, hit the water hard, temporarily blinding the empress, who surprised her again by laughing and getting a strong hold on her shoulder.

"Come. This way. Try to float. Don't struggle."

"Quite all right. . . . Fine. . . . Perfectly all right," Serena tried to say, but most of it was interrupted by another attack of coughing. It wasn't until the two women got to the side of the pool and groped for the marble edge that Serena could explain between coughs, "Swallowed water. Throat sore. Hard to speak."

Octavia seemed to understand. Curiously enough, she was not irritated over the triviality of Serena's complaint.

"You are concerned over someone who is . . . ill?"

Serena brushed hair and water out of her eyes.

"No! What do you mean?"

"I was told . . . I mean, I thought that you were using your wiles on my husband, to make him do what you desired. Perhaps even to have my brother and me murdered." Serena stared. The empress went on hurriedly, "But I saw your face today. You were cheering others, not my husband."

Serena avoided her eyes and studied the tile, running her fingers absently over the picture displayed in colored mosaic of Venus rising from the sea foam.

"Empress, just now you saved my life."

"You were not dying," Octavia reminded her with a sad little smile at her own impulsive action.

"But you thought I was. It is the same. I would not lie to the woman who did this thing. I have no relationship with the

emperor. He didn't even recognize me the last time we met. I am a vestal." She looked up. The puzzled empress was watching her closely. "I swear by holy Vesta that I have no designs against you or your family, nor ever have had."

Octavia studied her eyes, while Serena waited nervously, thinking how difficult it was to make one believe the truth.

"Lady Serena," the girl said suddenly, breaking the uneasy silence, "shall we continue our bath? Mine has hardly begun."

"I thank your Majesty. I hope I will never make you sorry you trusted me."

Octavia smiled. Serena marveled at how pretty the young empress was when she felt she could trust people. Half of her too-thin body shimmered below the surface of the water, but her well-developed breasts and excellent head would have graced a statue. In fact, with all the statues devoted to Nero and Agrippina, it seemed unfair that Nero's wife should be so little admired.

Both women dropped back and down into the water at the same time. For some reason Serena had supposed the empress was a bad swimmer, but if her "rescue" of Serena hadn't demonstrated her ability, her present swim down the length of the pool would have done so now.

While both young women paused together at the end of the pool and took deep breaths, Octavia sighed. "If only my brother could get some exercise! I'm certain he would regain his health."

"Is there no way to persuade him to chance it?"

Octavia shook her head, spattering water drops over her own and Serena's bare shoulders. "He might have recovered if Senator Lentulus hadn't died. We . . ." She hesitated. "We are convinced that the senator's road accident was deliberate. He knew or suspected something about my father's death." She eyed Serena obliquely. "We were told that you had been at his deathbed."

"Yes, Empress."

"Did he say anything pertinent to the fact?"

"He didn't say anything. He indicated . . . I hardly know what." She thought it safe to add what Octavia knew very well. "He seemed to believe that the emperor, your Majesty's father, was poisoned. But he couldn't imagine how the crime was committed. Nor can I. As you know, Empress, many people ate from the tray of his Majesty's food, including his

taster and the condemned criminal who ate the dressed mushrooms after they were reheated."

"But afterward, when you were treating him? Did you give him medicines?"

So this was what Octavia suspected, that poison had been given in the guise of a medicine! Thinking back, with her eyes closed, Serena said slowly, "I induced vomiting, but there was no drug used. Only the usual means, a feather in the throat, and mulsum, which I brought with me from the vestal kitchen. As you know, by religious law, our food must be of the purest ingredients."

"Still . . ." Octavia considered, then nodded. "I believe you; yet it was done. Somehow."

*But how?* Serena asked herself, though she didn't say it aloud. And what had Tigellinus' helmet to do with it, or at any rate, the brush plumes of the helmet that the dying Senator Lentulus had pointed to?

From the tepidarium the two women allowed themselves to be half-drowned in cold water poured over their bodies in the massaging room and then they were pummeled and massaged until, as Serena said, "My blood is singing through my body. I was so frightened and worried when I came in here, I never thought anything would help me."

"Frightened?" Octavia sat up on her table, wrapped in her gold-thread robe and looking absurdly young to be the emperor's wife.

Recalled to the danger of such revelations, Serena rattled on quickly, "All those four men risking their lives at the race-course. It was terrible when the Red charioteer was pulled under the horses' hooves."

"Oh, that. I had forgotten."

One of the pretty hairdressers stood behind Octavia and began to work on her thick, luxurious hair with its faint hue of red, not the bright red of her voluptuary mother, Messalina, or of her husband, Nero, but softer, gentler. Momentarily freed of her omnipresent worries and the hysteria brought on by them, Octavia chattered comfortably.

"Palaces make people do strange things. I shouldn't really be surprised that my husband wants to kill us. And his mother too, so she says. Maybe he thinks he is only getting back his revenge."

Serena was startled. "Revenge! For what?"

Octavia winced but did not chide the hairdresser who had

pulled her hair. "It was all so long ago. When Nero was a child and Messalina, my mother, was first married to Father, she tried to have Nero killed, first by a serpent, and then by two stranglers. She knew he would be dangerous to us."

Serena knew that the Empress Messalina had been a busy beauty and not above killing a rival's son, but that seemed a long way to go to seek a motive for Nero's attempts on the lives of Claudius, Octavia, and Britannicus. And now Agrippina. It almost seemed as if someone was pressing too hard to make Nero look guilty.

She tried to soothe the young empress by the reminder, "If Caesar wanted to wipe out your family, and his own mother, why have the attempts failed repeatedly? Wouldn't an imperial assassin be more successful?"

Another woman's voice, echoing through the hollow, steamy bathing rooms, startled both Octavia and Serena.

"What a clever little debater you are, my dear! You should make your points in the Curia, where the senators—unfortunately—have no great opinion of my son."

Serena was alarmed. Something about the Empress Agrippina always alarmed her, but she was interested to note that the empress had the same effect upon Octavia, to whom she was presumably devoted.

It was with great difficulty that Serena inclined her head in a respectful bow while her hair was being brushed and braided into the vestals' sacred six plaits and pinned with hair bodkins to follow the shape of her skull.

"Your Majesty! If you had been a few minutes earlier you might have seen the Lady Octaiva rescue me from a most unpleasant ducking."

A thread of a frown crossed the older woman's smooth brow. She glanced at Octavia, who, ever honest and direct with her feelings, blurted out, "I couldn't let her drown, could I?"

"Certainly not, my child. So you saved the Lady Serena's life! Well, well. We must only hope that if the case had been otherwise, the Lady Serena would have been as quick to rescue . . . But what am I saying? I am delighted to see how well you two beautiful young ladies are getting on in each other's company." She came to the table where Octavia sat, now looking decidedly ill-at-ease, like a child afraid of his schoolmaster's heavy cudgel.

Agrippina hugged her warmly, taking the opportunity to

remark, "How flushed you are, child! Not ill, I hope. Too much exertion, I'm afraid. Youth is so impetuous. With all the dangers that surround you, Octavia, you should be more prudent."

"I never felt better, my lady. I swear it," the girl protested feebly.

"Of course. And the Lady Serena and I admire your spirit, your refusal to admit fatigue. But you must husband your strength as the Lady Serena does. See how strong she looks. Positively indomitable."

"You are too kind, Empress," Serena replied, preferring to take the barbed compliment at face value. She was fully aware, however, that Octavia was seeing her once more in an unpleasant, even dangerous light.

Agrippina, always a thorough woman, repeated with a gracious smile, "Indomitable. If the Lady Serena wanted anything, she would let nothing and no one stand in her way." Her sigh was delicate but audible. "Unlike us poor females who let one scruple or another stand in our way. Yes. We could learn a great deal by observing her. Isn't it so, Octavia, my child?"

Serena would have liked to tear out the older woman's hair, but managed to smile at this deadly praise. She was surprised when Octavia protested, "But she doesn't want him. She swore it to me. They have nothing to do with each other. She isn't trying to influence Nero against my brother and me."

By the worst possible timing, old Hagar appeared in the doorway, bowed low to the two empresses, and informed Serena, "The emperor has sent for you, my lady. He asks you to visit his villa at once. The litter bearers are waiting."

Privately, Serena damned Nero and Hagar and fate for playing into Agrippina's hands, but she suspected the call had something to do with seeing Tigellinus, so she excused herself to the two empresses and hurried after Hagar to dress. As she left the room she couldn't help overhearing Agrippina's distinct, if low-pitched voice, "You see how it is, my poor child? Could anything be clearer?"

# 18

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Serena found a stylish gown, shift, ribbons, and sandals laid out with the imperial request that she wear them. The sight of this finery annoyed and yet tantalized her. It would be strange to discover the reaction aroused when she was seen in something other than her severe and sometimes awe-inspiring white gown. She dressed rapidly with Hagar's help. The old woman was too indignant at this shocking display to express any opinion. Serena got nowhere when she asked if the slave who brought the message from the emperor had any idea what she was wanted for.

"Why am I wanted? I must know what to bring. My tablets and stylus? What do they want?"

"It can't be for any good," Hagar grunted. "Make her look like the rest of the court, they say. Well, we know what that leads to!"

"Hagar!"

The old woman shrugged. "Well, I daresay in your decent white vestal gown you'd shame all those creatures that hang about the court. Just take care. That's all I've got to say on the matter!"

She was angrily crossing the gold laces from Serena's shoulders down under her bosom in the fashionably sensual way so that her breasts would be displayed at their fullest to rival the other patrician women in Nero's court. It was not a sight Hagar had ever expected to produce for these much-too-modern courtiers!

Serena was no longer shocked at the image reflected in the silver mirror. Since she had acknowledged her love for Philip, and since she had become a woman in the true sense of the word, she was no longer ashamed of her body, or of the voluptuous look of her pale throat with the high, rich curve of her breasts revealed above the virginal purity of the white gown. Let other men look at her with desire. This would

make her all the more worthy of Tigellinus. Even if others did want her, she would reserve such pleasures for a future day with Philip Tigellinus, and no other.

"Hagar, do be good. Tell me why I am wanted."

The old woman unbent, but stiffly. "It seems there's an injury in the emperor's household. Xenophen has been sent for, and he asked for you. There's the crux of it."

Half-hoping, Serena exclaimed, "Injury! What sort?"

"Knife wounds, I believe it is."

"Oh, Hagar! My darling Hagar!" Serena embraced her ecstatically.

Hagar shrugged off this enthusiasm with a great show of impatience.

"There, there! You'll spoil your pretty clothes, after all my fussing and making you look just so."

"Dearest Hagar!" Serena kissed the long wrinkles that slashed her cheek. The old woman blushed but was not to be won over without a stern warning.

"Maybe next time you'll let me massage you and arrange your hair instead of those idiot girls with their careless fingers."

Apprehensive again, Serena looked at her hair in the mirror.

"Isn't it properly done? The right number of plaits, wound the right way. If I am going over there to help the physician, maybe I should look plain. My gown should be heavier. I swear, you can see clear through the materials these days. Caesar is religious. I don't want him or Xenophen to get any notions that I am unfaithful to my vows as a . . ." She caught Hagar's sardonic expression and amended lamely, ". . . You know what I mean."

"Indeed, I do. And I know you've heard me say this a hundred times, but, my lady, *take care*. They don't want me along to keep you company. It's a bad omen. Remember, anybody who looks into your eyes can see what you feel."

No one knew better than Serena how dangerous the revelation of her love could be, dangerous to Tigellinus as well as herself. She took another, scared look. "Do my feelings really show in my eyes? I've been so careful, especially around the empresses."

"Be careful around everyone. What about this slave woman who's gotten above herself and is suddenly in the imperial enclosure? She knows far too much about you."

True enough. And though Claudia Acté was undoubtedly loyal to her friends, she was as naive as the Empress Octavia. She might reveal something by accident.

"I'll take great care. I promise you. Besides, Xenophen will be with me, and he is the last man in the world to betray anyone. He holds the secrets of half of Rome."

Hagar allowed herself to be persuaded, but when Serena left Agrippina's villa she was deeply aware of the devoted old woman's troubled gaze following her.

Nero's villa backed upon a select area of the bay cut off from other, less desirable neighbors by a promontory. The view at this moment of early evening was cloudy and threatened rain. Already, rain slanted across the bay on the horizon as Serena watched from the litter. Nero's two-story villa spread out around the promontory like a town in its own right. Much seemed to have been added on, and even this evening, carpenters and masons were out working on another addition. The road to the villa was crowded with other villas and estates, some of them thrown together so recently the cement was hardly dry and the wood still green. All the patricians wanted to have country estates cheek-by-jowl with the young emperor, whether they approved of him or not.

Darkness had already fallen over the area, and the lake's edge was bordered with delicate, shaded lamps by the time Serena stepped out of the litter and was met by two Thracian doorkeepers, who passed her on to a slave woman who announced herself to be in the service of the Lady Claudia Acté and led Serena to the apartment of her mistress. The room overlooked the Lucrine Lake, and the lamps along the water's edge shone in through the window embrasure. The draperies had not yet been drawn. The air beating in off the lake was moist with rain and reminded Serena that it was still winter.

The little apartment was spotless and austere, meagerly furnished in the Grecian style, with exquisite if cold artistry. Probably Acté's effort to satisfy her lover's Greek sympathies. A mural on a rust-red background showed Orpheus with his lyre wooing Eurydice back from the dark regions of the underworld. Serena was taken aback, though she tried not to show it, when she discovered that the face of the legendary, beautiful Orpheus was Nero's face, complete with the heavy neck and large sensual lips, the broad forehead, curly hair, and straining, nearsighted eyes.

Only one small lamp burned in the room, and Serena

started nervously when Acté spoke in her quiet way from what appeared to be an empty room.

"Lady Serena? I think you know why you are here."

Serena swung around, saw Acté get up from a cerule chair in the darkest corner of the room. Before coming to receive Serena she did a curious thing with her hands, running them over the mosaic top of a small taboret, using her fingers to trace the pattern with such care and tenderness one might have thought she plucked the strings of a lyre. Serena looked down, tilting her head at an angle to make out the pattern in black on a white background. Nothing but a fish. What an extraordinary—almost religious—gesture Acté had made over the mosaic portrait of a fish! Were people turning from pure and holy Vesta to the worship of a fish? Serena felt the sudden stab of her own guilt in religious matters. She had sacrificed the warm purity of the hearth goddess for the hot, throbbing pleasure of a man's masculinity within her loins. It was no more than mere physical pleasure.

She felt herself wince in protest and saw Acté frown at her in perplexity. But it was wrong to dismiss love as a mere transitory pleasure. She would love Philip as long as she lived, even if he never entered and possessed her body again. Mistaking Serena's sigh for a question, Acté looked back lovingly at the taboret with its black-and-white mosaic.

"That is a sign of my religion by which we recognize each other in the brotherhood. The initials spelling His name and title in Greek form a fish. It is understood by all who follow Him."

"His name? Whose name?"

"Jesus, called the Christ, Son of God."

Serena rubbed her head in confusion. "Yes, but which god? Jupiter, I expect. Like the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus."

Acté patted her arm. "Someday I will explain. It is complex, and you have no time. Come."

On the way through the high-roofed, marble-pillared halls, Serena remarked, "I thought Agrippina's villa was impressive, but it is nothing to this. . . . Tell me, please, who is Xenophen's patient?"

Acté said, "The prefect who saved Caesar's life. Nero gave Xenophen permission to send for you to help him. Xenophen is getting old. His hands tremble now and again. You can be of great assistance to him."

"Thank you." Serena glanced around, lowered her voice. "Can you tell me—was the empress with the prefect very long today?"

Acté smiled. "I believe she annoyed . . . that is to say, she made him nervous. He asked to be alone. Her Majesty left the arena in a very bad humor. Forgive me, but I understand her emotions."

Busy enjoying the information, Serena found that in her selfish personal pleasure she failed to understand the other woman's remark.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The prefect doesn't love the empress. I can sympathize. I am watching the great love of my world turn to another woman."

That did catch Serena. "Oh, no, Acté! You have always been faithful and good. You didn't turn away and marry another man as the empress did. No one will ever love Nero as you do. Without you, the gods alone know what will become of him."

Acté laughed, not too happily. "I wonder what Poppaea Sabina's influence on him will be."

Knowing how his mother's influence had tried to twist Nero into an ambitious ruler quite unlike the entertainer and athlete he wanted to be, Serena was not sure the vivacious, shrewd-eyed Poppaea would do much better.

"This thing with the Lady Poppaea is a mere flirtation, isn't it?" she asked hopefully. "He was hardly aware of her before last night."

"He is now. He was with her the entire night. And today he arrived at the racing arena with her. This very hour they are together at dinner." She added with a poignant stiffening of the shoulders, "But he spoke with me afterward. He asked me to call the physician Xenophen to attend the prefect, and anyone else who would help Tigellinus. He thanked me and kissed me. He really kissed me in the tenderest way."

Serena took her hand, squeezed it sympathetically. A year ago, even a month ago, she might not have understood Acté's feelings, but she understood now.

They went up a narrow flight of stairs. A series of small, compact bedroom cubicles opened off the upstairs hall. Acté counted the rooms, knocked on the fourth door. After a little wait Xenophen came to the door. He looked very tired and old, with his customary surly manner.

"So it's you, Lady Acté. I suppose you know you are late. I told you I must have relief. All night with the Prince Britannicus, and now this. Have you brought a muscular fellow to keep my patient down?"

"Not yet. But you asked the august Lady Serena to help you, and she is here."

He scowled at Serena. "Good! Come in. You are needed. Maybe you, with your prayers and incantations, can persuade my patient to stay in bed. Else he'll be crippled for life."

He held the door open. A little flushed at his request, Serena ducked into the room under the physician's outstretched arm. She had a sudden attack of shyness as she crossed the narrow room to the black-and-gold-painted couch with its scrolled head and footboards, so incongruous for Philip Tigellinus.

As Xenophen had predicted, the prefect wouldn't lie down. He sat on the couch making notations with a stylus in a wax tablet on the bare knee of his uninjured leg. The other leg was stretched out before him, stiff with splints and bandages. The stab wound between his ribs was covered by his thigh-length tunic, which was of the plain white linen he wore under his Praetorian uniform. Either the white tunic or the loss of blood added to his appeal for Serena, whose heart went out to him as he looked up and she saw his unaccustomed pallor. This only accentuated the blackness of his eyes and the smudges of suffering beneath them.

Seeing her, he automatically started to get up, winced, and sat back down on the side of the couch, apologizing, "Lady Serena, Lady Acté, forgive me. It was kind of you to come. This physician of yours has been browbeating me all afternoon, and I have to get out a report on Caesar's attacker."

"Perhaps I can help your Excellency. I am an excellent amanuensis, or so I am told," Serena said calmly, having restored her manner to its pleasant, cool, "vestal" quality.

There was a quirk of a smile around his lips, but he replied gravely, "Nothing could be more satisfactory. I am not much good with a stylus. My hands aren't agile enough. If the Lady Serena will take over my task, I can dictate to her, Xenophen may go and get his hard-earned rest, and you, Lady Acté, may return to the emperor before he asks me what I have done with his dear companion." Obviously he didn't understand why his little pleasantry was received with Acté's ironic little smile and shrug.

"I'll leave you now in good hands, Excellency." Then she was gone, followed by the voiced thanks of the prefect and the silent ones of Serena.

Xenophen's long white chiton of Greek cut was blood-stained, and Serena, noticing it for the first time, was shocked to realize just how much blood Philip must have lost in the attack. Still, it would take considerably more than the inept attack of the Red-faction supporter to bring down the tough, vigorous prefect.

"May I take the tablets, Excellency?" She glanced from Tigellinus to the physician. "This might relieve the prefect's work, and then he can rest as you wish."

Xenophen nodded slowly. "If he must work, he must. Go on." He went over to the copper basin on the table under a small, high window through which the wind-driven rain had begun to pour in despite the heavy velvet curtains. He washed his hands, wiped them on one of the emperor's gold-embroidered towels, and threw a command over his shoulder. "Well, help him. His time is Caesar's time, and that is valuable."

It was a wise reminder. Serena and Philip had been looking into each other's eyes without moving. They seemed to sense that their thoughts were mutual. They were enjoying the sudden mental communion between two people. Serena had never experienced it before, but she didn't doubt that during the ten years and more of Agrippina's relationship with Tigellinus they had known many such moments. Xenophen's voice, old, tired, and cross, restored them to the dangers of their situation.

"If your Excellency will give me the tablets," she suggested.

"With pleasure, august lady." His mockery was gentle, and she understood it. As he put the tablets and stylus in her hands, their fingertips touched. Tigellinus did not smile but looked down at them, his fingers curling hard and tight over hers, as if he would never let them go.

Serena hated to break the magic of this minute, but her practical nature asserted itself, and while she withdrew her hand slowly, and sat on the couch beside him, she said for Xenophen's benefit, "You may begin to dictate." She examined what he had already written. "Really, Prefect, you are not the clearest writer in the world." With the opposite end

of the stylus she rubbed out a word on the wax surface and respelled it. "Please continue."

Elaborately businesslike, Tigellinus pursued his thoughts on the subject of the would-be assassin, this time aloud. "Though subject had paraded the colors of the Red faction, faction itself makes no defense of subject, claiming he acted of his own volition. From a preliminary examination made while prefect of police was effecting temporary—"

"Excuse me," Serena put in. "You mean Praetorian prefect?"

"This is a police matter. Not a military matter. Resume: . . . while prefect of police was effecting temporary repairs to stab wounds, it is believed that the assassin was driven to act quite alone. There seem to have been no sympathizers likely to cause future trouble. Caesar has never been more popular. The attitude of the crowd was wildly pro-Caesar." He stopped talking.

Serena finished writing, turned the leaf of the tablet to continue writing, but became aware that the couch had moved suddenly, as if the prefect shifted his weight. She saw that he had stiffened in pain and his lips were tightly pressed together to hide a groan. She slipped her free hand into his, trying quietly to express her sympathy. He grinned with an effort and glanced over at Xenophen. Seeing that the physician was busy overlapping the heavy draperies to keep out the rain, Tigellinus brought Serena's hand to his lips.

Studying his face with all her tenderness in her eyes, Serena saw signs of the strain and the physical effort he had undergone that afternoon. An effort obviously aggravated by his interrogation of the would-be assassin during the very time he was attending to his own wounds. He was a remarkably tough man, which made her more than ever proud of him. She didn't think twice about the fate of the maddened attacker. It was of no interest. Like most Romans who placed justice above all things and compassion among the lesser, more frail virtues, she reserved her sympathy for the man who had saved the emperor.

Xenophen set the copper basin aside, wiped raindrops off his gnarled hands, and wadding up the towel, tossed it onto the table.

"Lady Serena, if you can persuade my patient to sleep, I will thank you. Are you permitted to stay here until I return?"

She considered his request. "If I am permitted by the emperor, and if the prefect has no objection."

Tigellinus' warm hand, resting between his body and Serena's, barely touched her thigh. She was careful to show no reaction. He shrugged. "I don't promise to sleep. I have my report to complete. Caesar will expect it before tomorrow."

"I doubt very much if Caesar will have time to look at any reports tonight, Excellency," the physician remarked.

"Oh?"

Xenophen asked, "Are you acquainted with General Otho's wife?"

Tigellinus looked at Serena. She realized that he had missed all the new developments regarding Poppaea Sabina.

"No."

Xenophen said dryly, "Well, Caesar is! However, to present matters. You are now in the excellent care of the Lady Serena. She has assisted me many times. I'll be relieving you in two hours, my lady."

"Thank you. You are very kind."

"Not kind at all. Not at all. Your Excellency, if you do not rest now, you will limp permanently."

"I always considered myself a kind of Vulcan," Tigellinus quipped, as he shifted the position of his leg, which was still stretched out on an army folding camp chair in front of him.

Xenophen brushed himself off, removed his bloodstained chiton, and wearing his familiar ankle-length dark robe beneath it, went down to eat and rest in one of the servant dining rooms, leaving Philip and Serena alone.

Philip moved, clearly trying to put all his weight on his good leg.

"What are you doing? Are you mad!"

"I'm only going to bolt the door. My darling, your patient wouldn't dream of hobbling off to leave you here alone."

With sharp concern she scolded him, "I'll do it. You stay where you are."

She went to bolt the door, and hesitated with her hand on the bolt. "It will look suspicious. We shouldn't lock the door. People are sure to wonder."

Indignant, he asked her with the most innocent look, "Do you mean to tell me that I can be aroused from my hard-earned sleep by just any passerby because you neglected to lock the door? I am an invalid, kindly remember."

She laughed and threw the bolt. "You are too absurd!"

"I love you. Does that make me absurd?"

She hurried back to him. "Please, dearest . . . I mean, Prefect, anyone might hear us."

He reached for her wrists, drew her to him. "*Carissima*, no one can hear us in this icy cell. And only the gods know when we may have any privacy again. As a matter of fact, I think I owe that despicable little assassin a reward for providing this moment."

Terrified that she would fall against his wounded leg or the apparently lighter cut between his ribs, she protested, "We've such a little time, darling. But someday—"

"Someday you are going to be the wife of a mere Sicilian freedman, *carissima*. And if we don't have to wait until I am an old man, we may have a family. Now, we certainly must discuss our family plans."

"Family plans!"

"Well, we can't very well rush off five years from now and start our family without having made prior plans. You know. The sex and—"

"Philip, we cannot talk about sex while I remain a vestal."

"You are right as always, sweetheart. And I mean to make myself so indispensable, that Caesar will have to give me the one gift I demand of him. You know what I shall ask for."

She shook her head. "He will never free me from my vows. Only Tullius Servius Lucas, the pontifex maximus, can do that, and he was helped to that post by the Empress Agrippina. He would never dare disobey her wishes."

He looked into her eyes. He was no longer teasing.

"Tullius Servius is very old. He can scarcely string one thought after another, and Nero will show him that the disgrace of having you flee the order would be worse than simply freeing you."

"If you are right, Philip! But Acté reminds me that Nero will never commit an act against religion."

"Pessimist! To get back to the subject. The sex of . . ." Before she could accuse him of being obsessed by the subject, he went on firmly, "the sex of our children."

He laughed at the softening of her expression and pulled her down against his chest while she protested, "Your wounds! They will bleed!"

"Let them. You are a very unromantic female. Here I am, ready to give my last drop of blood for you in order to dis-

cuss our two daughters and one son, and all you can talk about are surgical matters."

"Two daughters and one son! You are so—"

"Enchanting?"

"Preposterous."

"And you love me. Kiss me." He moved her slightly to the right of his injured left leg, brought her face close to his. She felt the tension that gripped his body. The knowledge that he was aroused had its effect upon her own emotions. She fought against the heat of passion that began to engulf her.

"No. We must wait. Darling, help me to keep my vows."

"You vowed you loved me. . . . But very well. We'll call these our last moments until I can demand your freedom. A few more idiot attacks like that one today," he added with his wry smile, "and Nero will be unable to refuse me. Serena . . ." She looked at him uneasily. "Kiss me!"

She was hungry to touch his lips, to be a part of his warm, strong flesh once more. For a brief instant snatches of her vows to holy Vesta shot through her brain. This burning impulse to join his lips and his body, which were both infinitely dear to her—was this a vile impulse? She would not let it be so.

She touched his lips with her own, absorbing in that first touch something of his strength and passion, but more of those sensual joys he had brought into her life. She crushed her mouth upon his, delighting in her newfound power, aware that her body responded to his as if all her dreams had been a schooling for this reality.

They clung together in their embrace until Serena pleaded indistinctly that she couldn't breathe. She struggled in his arms, and he held her, half-playful, half-determined, until he lost his balance and fell back among several pillows with Serena on top of him. In spite of the painful shaking up of his injured leg, his grip on her body remained firm.

"My darling," he told her hoarsely, "be patient. I can still love you, and I mean to do so, leg or no leg."

"Someone may come."

"May the furies take them! If I am not to have my love and my bride again for an aeon, I will have her now."

"Your injury."

"Numb, my darling. That last tussle did it. I can't even feel it."

She lay facing him on the couch, excited to the highest

pitch she had ever known, with the curves of her body pressed against his, and against the strong proof of his love for her.

"You will open your wound. You will hurt—"

"You?"

She laughed softly. "Never."

With fingers that shook a little, he untied the cords of her gown, lingered lovingly over her hard, sensitive breasts. She, now very wise and very knowing, placed her hands upon the tunic he wore, and upon his body beneath. She was ready as he took her, and they were united.

It was a strange, burning, violent union. They knew there might never be another time for them. She might not be freed from her vows. He might be executed or die in one of Rome's frequent imperial upheavals. The only time for them was now.

# 19

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There had been an added tension in the nearness of danger during their lovemaking that night. But uppermost in their minds through the enjoyment of each other and the marvel of their union was the poignant knowledge that only an accident of fate had provided these unforgettable moments.

"I can't let you return to that rigid, unnatural life in the Vestals' House," Philip protested suddenly as he watched her restore her gown and hair to some kind of order.

She stopped with her hands in midair. She was aghast that he hadn't understood. This was their last intimate meeting until she could be freed of her vows. She tried to make him understand.

"But, dearest, I must return. They are my vows. Besides . . ." She tried to lighten his mood, to make a gentle joke about it. "You would soon be tired of me if I were like all the others."

He raised up from the couch, reached high, and in spite of a spasm of pain that he couldn't hide, he seized her hand and brought it down, half-imprisoning her.

"My darling girl, I am not a man of many women. I never was. My ambitions ran in a different channel. Once I thought I knew a woman I could love—and help—forever. I was wrong." His dark eyes studied her face. "But I'm not wrong about you. Nero owes me a great deal. He'll do something to free you."

She felt torn by her own selfish desire to give herself to him again. Now and forever. But another part of her, perhaps her conscience, despised her easy yielding to physical passion. The vows she had taken seemed to sear themselves upon her happier thoughts.

"If you love me, let me go, dearest." She made a resolve and went on, "I mustn't see you again until I am freed of my vows." He pulled her to him tightly, but she insisted, stam-

mering a little in the effort, "Help me . . . please, dearest, help me to keep my vows until I am released."

"How?" he demanded roughly, shaking her hand.

"Don't try to see me in Rome. Not now. You only make it harder for us."

This truth seemed to strike him as logical, and after an eerie little silence she felt his warm, hard hand fall away from hers, but still he persisted. "How can we live in the same city and not meet? What about the religious holidays, the games, the ceremonies, all the other times we are thrown together? What am I supposed to do? Turn away from you? Pretend there is nothing between us, not even a look? A smile?"

When he talked like that, reasoning with her and quiet, it twisted her heart. She was careful not to glance at him as she made her suggestion. "You know Nero will be going to Greece sooner or later to enter the music contests. He can't go without you. You've looked after him, defended him, all his life. If . . . if you remain in Greece, as you are bound to do by your oath to serve him, I can . . ."

"What? Forget me?"

"Get back my self-respect. Keep to my vows. Until we are both free."

"You ask me to look after Nero. What about you, far away from me in Rome? What if you need me?"

"But I couldn't be safer. What could happen to me in the Vestals' House, surrounded by my vestal sisters?"

He took a breath, sighing and angry at the same time. Then he laughed shortly. "I'll do as you ask. Remain away from you. On one condition."

This time she looked at him, half-afraid of what he would say. He must have guessed her feelings. He said, "When you are free, you will belong to me."

"Yes. Oh, yes!"

"Then I swear to stay away from you, make no effort to see or be near you until you give me the word."

This time when he drew her to him she made no resistance. She felt the promise of the future in that kiss and returned to him passion for passion. Locked in each other's arms, they gave with their kisses a pledge for the future when their bodies and their lives would be joined, with the approval of Serena's great goddess Vesta.

When Xenophen returned, scrupulously careful not to exceed his allotted two hours, he found the door unbolted

and Serena sitting with the wax tablets in her lap, a little more than arm's length from the couch. The "patient" lay stretched out with his eyes closed and his stern, hard face softened by a smile.

"His dreams must be pleasant. I envy him," Xenophen remarked dryly, and added, "There has been a message for you, my lady. You are to return."

Naturally, she thought. Agrippina wouldn't want her near Tigellinus any longer than necessary. She collected her cloak and veil.

"A message from the empress, I suppose."

"Not this time. The messenger was sent from Rome originally by the senior vestal, Lady Maxima. It seems there is trouble in the House of Vestals and she needs you."

Serena threw the cloak around her shoulders. Tigellinus had insisted on retying the cords under the bosom of her gown. His fingers might have been willing, but they possessed little of Hagar's artistry, and Serena covered herself quickly with the travel cloak. Xenophen's eyes might be watery and old, but they were far from blind.

"I'll leave at once. But my dear Hagar is at the empress's villa. I can't go without her."

Xenophen waved this aside. "No need. She will be arriving at any minute. With your travel case. The emperor will provide the travel carriage."

"What! Is it so urgent, then?"

"Evidently. The empress wasted no time in having your property ready when she read the communication from the chief vestal."

"I'll go immediately." She turned away from the man on the couch, hating to leave with a mere ritual farewell to him. She knew he was only feigning sleep and suspected he must be sharing her regret. She had taken a step or two before Tigellinus' voice caught and held her.

"Lady Serena, may I trouble you for my stylus? It seems to have fallen beside your sandal."

She knew quite well the stylus was where she had left it, on a taboret at the end of his couch, but she stooped, with her hand hidden by her cloak, pretended to pick up something, and offered her hand to Tigellinus, who was sitting up now, his face a mask of civil indifference. He caught her fingers, caressed them with his thumb, and thanked her, still with that sham of indifference.

"May you find your vestal sisters happy and well, august lady."

She found it difficult to speak. She freed her hand with a quick, rough gesture because she did not want to free it at all. She managed a brief "Very kind, Excellency. Farewell."

Though she knew he was watching her, she left the room without looking back. She knew that Xenophen would have read her feelings in her face.

She was met in one of the wide halls below by Hagar, dressed for travel in a gray cloak and hood, and by Leander Pella, a dazzling sight in much jewelry and a blue cloak that almost matched his eyes. While he rushed to seize her hand and wrist in greeting, with the assurance that he had orders to defend her person to the death on the return journey, Serena looked around his carefully groomed head at Hagar.

"Is it so bad, back in Rome?"

Hagar shrugged. "Who's to say? The Lady Maxima is getting on in years, as we all are. She always did count on you as her second in command."

"My dear Lady Serena, believe me," Leander tried to reassure her, "once you are safely gotten back in Rome—which shall be my own special task—all will be well. She has only to see your lovely face, if I may say so, and her problems will be solved."

"Pompous to the end," Hagar muttered. Serena frowned her to silence but spoiled this by winking at her.

Leander completed his exquisitely stylized conduct by laying her hand upon his arm and starting to escort her into a cross hall, decorated with new life-sized statues so tightly set together they looked like an army of the dead closing in on her.

"Where are we going? Hagar, aren't you coming with us?"

Hagar pointed to Leander. "He says the emperor wants to see you before we go. I'll be waiting in the litter."

Serena was surprised but not averse to seeing Nero. The way that reluctant young man had managed to govern with great success at such an early age fascinated her. She still suspected there might be another side to him that she had never seen, a shadowy man who instigated the murder of his stepfather, the Emperor Claudius, and might even be back of these supposed attempts against Agrippina and Britannicus. But she was open to any reasonable persuasion that he was innocent.

The truth was, she liked him much better than his "inno-

cent and put-upon" mother, Agrippina, and realized this might be the basis for her belief that young Octavia was mistaken in her suspicions.

She remarked to Leander, "I thought you were Agrippina's man. Are you in Caesar's service now?"

Leander was nothing if not a courtier. "Both, august lady. It just happens that I was sent over here by her Majesty to see what was going on—that is to say, to see if my services were needed by that brave fellow, the new Praetorian prefect. Tigellinus isn't very popular, you know. Those proud Praetorians hate the idea of a policeman, a freedman at that, presiding over their lives. The empress wasn't sure whether Xenophen would be willing to treat him. As it happened, our fears were groundless."

He was probably right. Serena knew Tigellinus had never been popular. With very good reason, the world was afraid of him. Serena acknowledged to herself that this fact should have influenced her against him. It hadn't.

The emperor was on his dinner couch with two friends. Serena found herself ushered into the small, crowded room with its food murals of red, rust, and blue that furthered the feeling of walls closing in. There were two other couches in the room, making the requisite nine dinner guests in all. To Serena the most important fact was the absence of Claudia Acté. She knew her forebodings were absurd, but the gentle ex-slave's influence on her lover had always been for good, never for personal ambition.

Beside Nero, sharing his couch, was the dazzling beauty Poppaea Sabina. She had curled her body as close to his as humanly possible without the actual performance of copulation. Her gown of green gauze was clearly her only garment and revealed the leg and hip of a slender but short woman. Her breasts were obviously small, almost adolescent, and had been rouged for greater effect. One of Nero's hands warmly explored the slight cleft between her breasts while he talked with great interest to the languid male winner of a Greek musical contest on his other side.

The philosopher Seneca, having buried his arguments for the Stoic life long enough to enjoy the dinner, was at the next couch and glanced up to see Serena in her flowing white vestal's robes, looking very much like that once popular Egyptian item, the skeleton at the feast. He smiled, hailed her with a casual salute, and called to the emperor, "Divine Cae-

sar, you asked that the august Lady Serena report to you after she had seen our brave prefect. Here she is."

Blushing darkly, Nero raised his head, whose flyaway red hair was still crowned by the laurel wreath he had won earlier in the day. The leaves were dead now, and the wreath had slipped to the back of his head. He looked as young and ingenuous as he had the night his stepfather died. Serena wondered how much he had changed inwardly. It seemed to her that she still heard the echo of that subservient oriental title, so very un-Roman: "Divine Caesar." It sounded almost like the bad days under Caligula. She needn't have worried, however.

Nero grinned and waved away Seneca's effusive title.

"Seneca, don't play the courtier before the Lady Serena. She knew me before I wore the toga of manhood. You can't convince her that I am divine."

"Your Majesty is better than divine," she said, playing the courtier herself, though with a base of sincerity.

His eyebrows went up in surprise. "Better?"

"Your Majesty is beloved."

His mercurial nature was deeply touched. Several courtiers looked at Serena with hearty dislike because her compliment had been so warmly received. Nero cleared his throat, thanked her emotionally, and added, "We will miss your lovely presence, Serena . . . my lady. It is unfortunate that the august Lady Maxima was so insistent about your returning. You are needed here, you know. My stepbrother, Britannicus, is much better since your arrival."

Poppaea Sabina whispered to him, tickling his ear with her lips. He laughed.

"Our clever Poppaea suggests that even my wife has stopped accusing me of monstrous crimes since you came. I don't know how you did it, but you succeeded."

"You are too kind, Caesar." She was unhappy at leaving Tigellinus, anxious about whatever troubled the House of Vesta, and uneasy over the obvious influence of General Otho's wife on the emperor. She still saw signs of his emotional, ingenuous personality that she had always liked, but just for a moment when she came into the dining room, she had thought he looked ridiculous, and the idea saddened her.

"Well . . . well . . ." Clearly, Nero had ended the interview and wasn't yet imperious enough to dismiss her with imperial indifference. "Run along back to Rome. The court will

follow you soon, but I know the august senior vestal needs you at once, and we won't stand in your way, much as we might enjoy your company."

Serena bowed and left the crowded dining chamber, which had been silent during the talk between Nero and the vestal. Almost before she stepped out into the marble-adorned hall with Leander belatedly hurrying after her, she heard the commotion begin again, the voices, the metallic ringing of wine goblets, the gossip and erotic playing.

Except for the pain of being separated from Tigellinus, she was relieved to return to the House of Vesta. The company of Maxima, Damaris, Clea, and the others was far more enjoyable than that of the two imperial courts at Baiae.

She found that the litter provided for her and Hagar belonged to the emperor himself. Its roof was reinforced against the weather, and the interior was so full of silks, broades, sybaritic pillows and eastern rugs that Serena looked around in perplexity. Leander laughed at her surprise, and Claudia Acté, who was under the shelter of the villa roof beside the litter, smiled gently.

"Caesar insisted. He is very good. You will find Hagar inside among all those pillows."

The old woman stuck her head out of the elegant little traveling house. "Look. Along with the draperies, there is a wooden door, my lady. One would think we were in a Parthian bazaar. Such nonsense!" But it was clear that she thrived on it.

"The sooner we get back to our normal conditions in the Vestals' House, the better," Serena announced sourly, and after embracing Acté, she climbed into the travel carriage. She knew her own bad humor was the result of her parting, perhaps forever, from the man she loved. Her companions felt the unjust rebuke, and her departure from Baiae was made in smoldering silence.

She felt a little better after a night's sleep. When Leander Pella made gallant efforts to seduce her with words the next day, riding horseback beside the carriage whose curtains and door were open, Serena was able to lead him on jokingly, while amusing Hagar with her low-voiced side comments. During one of the few times when they were alone Hagar asked caustically, "What is it he wants of you, my lady? It's my opinion he's doing all this for effect. But what effect?"

"What, indeed? I agree with you there must be a reason."

She teased, "It can't be my exotic charms. You are right about that."

"I didn't mean that, my lady, and you know it!"

Serena considered the previous night, their dinner at an imperial inn and Leander's rather obvious efforts to get her drunk. No matter how charming he was to Serena, she had felt instinctively that there was some secret purpose in his monumental effort to seduce her. Had he no conception of the danger, to him as well as to her, if someone caught them in a compromising situation?

The second evening of the trip, it proved impossible to find an inn suitable for a vestal, and Serena and Hagar did the only polite thing, inviting the young physician to dine with them, picnic fashion, in the little travel carriage. He seemed eager to refill Hagar's silver goblet with his endless supply of Setinian wine, and Hagar, whose bones had gotten pretty old for all this bumping and jarring of travel, did not refuse the wine. Leander kept gallantly pouring, over Serena's annoyed hints; for like all who have drunk too much, Hagar resented her mistress's interference.

Leander glanced at the nodding Hagar, who had begun to snore with her eyes closed, and asked, "May I say something, Serena?"

She looked at him over the rim of her own goblet. Mistrusting him, she had dawdled at her wine, wondering if she could catch him in whatever mischief was stirring.

He caught himself. "Lady Serena."

She invited him to confide in her, giving him her most innocent stare. "Yes, my friend. What is it?"

He leaned toward her earnestly. He was actually perspiring. With nervousness, not with love, she thought.

"Is it possible . . . could you ever care for me? . . . Serena, I love you so."

She caught her breath. He was a cautious, ambitious man. He would never commit any act so dangerous to his career as this attempt to seduce a vestal. Unless he had been ordered to do so by an authority greater than a vestal. An authority so high Leander need not fear the penalty.

She smiled shyly, looked down at the goblet, turning it in her fingers. He didn't seem to find anything incongruous in her manner. Absurd fellow! Even young Clea would have behaved more maturely than Serena was acting. She hoped her contempt was hidden beneath all this innocent facade.

Leander reached for her hand. Wondering how far he would dare to go before she had to bring him sharply to task, she let him take her hand in his.

"What small, delicate fingers!"

This didn't raise him in her esteem. Her long, capable fingers might be thin, but they were far from "small and delicate."

"Leander, you are very bold. Such talk can be dangerous. Don't you know that?"

He knew. No question about that. She saw his eyes darting around the little travel carriage as if he suspected spies everywhere. Then some reassurance came to him, and he grinned. "Are you afraid?"

What reassurance did he have? she wondered. "Of course I am. I should think you would be."

He shrugged and brought her palm up to his lips before she could free her hand.

"Love makes me bold."

Really! He sounded like a comic player in the amphitheater. More curious than ever, and with a growing anxiety over the identity of his protector, she scolded him, "I have no wish to be buried alive, and love has nothing to do with it."

Hagar's sleepy, wine-thickened voice came to them from her corner: "Who's buried alive? Anybody I know?"

Serena said stiffly, "No, I thank the gods! Nor will there be."

"Talk . . . talk . . . talk . . ." Hagar muttered, and went back to sleep with her mouth open.

"I think you had better go," Serena suggested, but Leander pleaded with a desperation that puzzled, though it didn't move her.

"Do at least consider my feelings, lovely lady. Don't dismiss me like this. I love you. I've loved you since that day when I saw you in the garden of my uncle's house on the Esquiline. Love isn't a thing you toss out like yesterday's kitchen scraps."

"It is if you are consecrated to Vesta. Not content with trying to bedazzle a young vestal like Damaris, you turn, for no reason that I can see, and spin your wiles around me."

"It isn't the same thing at all," he insisted, pale with his effort to convince her. He reached for her. She tried to avoid him, but his hands seemed to be everywhere.

"It is late. I don't like to be rude, but you will have to go. Farewell until morning."

"But . . . don't you . . . can't you love me a little bit?" he pleaded. Now he had her in his arms.

She was more disgusted than angry. She stopped struggling to inform him in the stern voice of a public pedagogue who addressed an unwilling pupil: "There is no such thing as loving a little bit. Go on, now. Don't make difficulties. The empress is liable to find out, and then where will you be?"

"You needn't concern yourself with the empress. She wouldn't care." He wrestled her back to her pillows. She called breathlessly, "Hagar!" but the old woman snored on. He was on top of her now and holding her with one leg across her abdomen and legs. One hand covered her mouth. Her disgust gave way to fury in which there was a hint of panic. She gathered her muscles for a mighty effort to throw him off, but his soft lips prowled over her mouth, her throat, and his fingers slipped the sacred woven cloth off her left breast. The warmth of her breast and the telltale stiffening of the aureole and nipple intoxicated him. He whispered hoarsely as he caressed her, "You want me. You want me to take you now!"

Despite a fury and indignation she had never known before, she managed to lull him momentarily as his hand cupped the shape of her breast and his head bent to touch her flesh with his mouth again. Then she got one hand free and tugged his precious blond hair so violently he screamed, and his body pulled away. She covered herself. To make the matter clearer, she slapped him hard. This gesture of a pedagogue to an unruly child brought him to his senses.

"I . . . am forced . . ." he began lamely, adding on a small note of hope, "but I want you . . . that part is true, I swear!"

In a low voice, always aware of the sleeping guards in the marshland around them, she warned him, "If you ever try such a thing again, you won't live to boast of it. I have friends. Higher than the empress."

That shook him. More than the humiliation of the slap and the painful hair-pulling. He paled noticeably as he stared, not knowing how to get out of this dangerous business with any grace or dignity.

Hagar awoke with a loud snore and stared around in confusion. Breathing hard, Leander looked at Serena, his face

reddening where she had slapped him, and to her amazement, tears welled up in his blue eyes. He further confounded her by stretching out a hand that shook, whispering desperately, "Please . . . you don't understand . . ."

Then, realizing his effort was hopeless, he threw open the door and climbed out, turning to salute her as she closed the door.

"What in Tartarus was the matter with him?" Hagar asked between yawns.

"I wish I knew. I *very much* wish I knew."

Of one thing she was sure. He had given it away when he told her he wasn't afraid that the empress would find out. It was the empress who had put him up to this idiotic seduction attempt. The purpose? Probably to destroy her, and most certainly to destroy the relationship Agrippina suspected between Tigellinus, the man she loved, and Serena.

It was a terrifying thought, the lengths Julia Agrippina would go to in order to destroy a rival. There were times like this when Serena felt herself threatened by both imperial factions, because if Nero, or one of his agents, had been the sinister brain behind the deaths of the Emperor Claudius and Senator Lentulus, he too would be happy to see her destroyed.

She shook her head obstinately.

"What is it, my lady? Do you have a headache?"

Serena said to herself, "I can't believe Nero is such a good actor. He likes and trusts me. I know he does!" She caught Hagar staring at her and thrust her problems aside. "Never mind. Let's go to bed." She determined to say nothing about Leander's behavior. Even a hint of it, and everyone would assume he had gone farther, and she would be condemned, like Damaris.

She was bathed by Hagar from a large basin of lukewarm water, and changed to her heavy night robes, for it was cold and rainy in the grove of olive trees outside. After Hagar freed her hair of its confining ribboned plaits and brushed the long strands thoroughly, both women crawled beneath their bedclothes and after a long time, Serena was able to sleep.

Two days later, during which Leander's overtures tapered off, as if he too realized the ultimate danger, their arrival in a rain-washed, sparkling white Rome was an augury to Serena.

"It's all going to be a mistake, Hagar. Wait and see. Lady Maxima was lonely, or a trifle sick. Nothing more. I can feel

it in this glorious air. Rome! How good it is to be coming home!"

Hagar was skeptical, but then, Rome was only her second home, and she couldn't share Serena's uplifted spirits at sight of the Temple of Juno Moneta on one hill above lesser marble structures, and the noble Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline, both looking down upon the tiny round Temple of Vesta in the Forum below.

Since the law forbade wheeled traffic during the daylight hours, Serena's wheeled carriage had been replaced by a double litter with eight bearers plus Leander leading the way in the role of lictor, from the Porta Capena to the Vestals' House. Before they reached the house, Serena swung out of the litter, instantly helped by Leander, and ran past the round Temple of Vesta and behind it into the Vestals' House. Her home. She was through the foyer and halfway through the cool, elegant atrium before young Clea, on grain duty, recognized and called to her.

"Oh, Serena, at last! The august lady has made life miserable for us while you were gone. As if it were our fault! Damaris won't listen to Lady Maxima; so why should she listen to us?"

This was ominous. What was Damaris up to now? Her romantic hero, Leander Pella, could hardly be blamed. He had spent the last few days either in Baiae or on the road.

Serena removed her mantle, meanwhile, giving herself time to think. "What has Damaris been doing?"

Clea's eyes were wide with excitement and a certain very natural pleasure at the prospect of sexual scandal. It was clear to Serena that the child hadn't thought through the calamitous aspects of the scandal.

"It's . . . men, I think."

"You mean . . . a man?"

Clea insisted in a loud whisper, "No. Men. Lady Justitia's body slave saw Damaris coming out of a . . . brothel."

Serena tried to hide her shock. "Well, the woman was wrong; that's all. She is a notorious gossip and has a tongue like an adder. The whole idea is preposterous. Damaris doesn't even know what a brothel is. *And neither do you, Lady Clea!*"

"No, indeed. No, no. Quite so. Only . . . what's to be done?"

Serena drew herself up sternly. "First of all, you are to say

nothing. No more gossip about brothels. You understand me?"

"Yes, my lady." Subdued and scared, Clea went back to pounding the grain for the vestals' sacred bread.

Serena threw her mantle over her arm and with a firm step walked to the open peristyle. At the far end of the garden sat Lady Maxima, with her hands tightly meshed together. She was staring into the fountain. It was heart-wrenching to Serena to see how old the senior vestal had grown in the last ten days.

# 20

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Hearing Serena's footsteps on the small cobblestones, Lady Maxima raised her head. Her austere features brightened with a warmth and vivacity that made her look years younger.

"Dear child, home again! And a welcome sight you are."

She reached out, took Serena's hand, and stopped her in the middle of a respectful bow. "No, Serena. Soon we will be equals. I am not as young as I once was."

"Don't say such things, my lady. They aren't true. None of us can get along without you. But you do need a time of peace and comfort. Not all these endless problems we keep inflicting upon you."

Lady Maxima's wrinkled lips softened, lifted. "You think I should have gone to Baiae in your place? Perhaps I should have. Then you would have inherited the problems here at home. When it is a matter of Damaris, you probably understand her a great deal better than I do. You are so much nearer to her in age. Come. Sit down. No one can handle these girls as you do."

As she seated herself on the stone bench beside the senior vestal, Serena wondered wryly what turn her life would have taken if Lady Maxima had gone to Baiae. If Serena hadn't stopped at the country inn on the way to the resort . . . If the Praetorians hadn't attempted to assault her . . . If she and Philip Tigellinus hadn't become lovers. . . . Her future life was now mentally entwined with his forever.

"It's Damaris, isn't it, my lady?"

Lady Maxima wrung her hands again. "How I could have been so wrong about her! When the pontifex maximus asked me honestly if the child wasn't too pretty to devote her life and body to the goddess, I pointed to you. You were my example: the beautiful child who became a beautiful vestal, with never a thought for the life of a normal woman."

Serena felt the heat of the blush that suffused her face.

Never until now had she felt the deep shame of her love for the prefect. Her conduct on the road to Baiae, and in Philip's room at the imperial villa, his constant presence in her thoughts—all these matters made every kind word of the senior vestal strike her like hammer blows.

"No, my lady! I am not what you think. I am a normal woman, not worthy of gentle Vesta, or of my robes. Don't you see? I am—"

Lady Maxima stopped her firmly. "Serena, we all believe we are unworthy. And so we should. It is right to be humble. We all have our moments of regret, as well. I myself have occasionally found myself wishing, wondering what it would be like to have known a man, to have given birth to a daughter like you, or like that charming little rogue Clea. I have even pictured myself with my grandchildren—how dear to me they might have been!"

"Lady Maxima—"

"My daughter would have been very like you, I think. And your children would have been dearer to me than my life. I can see them now. How I love them!" Then, abruptly, she thrust her clenched hands into the fountain, as if the waters were blue flames leaping high. She turned to Serena, her own well-remembered firmness and decision returning to her face. "But that was not our mission in life. And now we must rescue that foolish, wild Damaris from her folly, if it is humanly possible."

Almost afraid to know the answer, for in Damaris' trouble she saw her own crimes against holy Vesta, Serena asked apprehensively, "What is this folly committed by Lady Damaris?"

"You know Justitia's Thracian body slave?"

"A gossipy old harridan. Poor Justitia is practically in her power. I wouldn't believe anything the woman says, without independent evidence."

"Would you believe the evidence of a vestal's own eyes?"

Thinking of the impressionable younger vestals, Serena said sharply, "It would depend entirely upon the vestal."

Lady Maxima looked at her. "Myself."

Serena groaned. This shattered her rising hope that the whole thing would prove to be nothing but the jealous old slave's gossipy tongue. For her plain mistress's sake the old Thracian had always disliked the pretty and independent Damaris.

"Tell me about it."

As if she would like to put off the painful story, Lady Maxima looked around, saw Hagar hesitating at the far end of the peristyle, with two female slaves holding Serena's travel baggage. She raised her voice over the splash and spray of the fountain. "Take the Lady Serena's things to her chamber and then put away the travel articles for the general use." When they were gone, she asked Serena, "Were you successful in your mission at Baiae?"

"The young Prince Britannicus was about as he has been, an invalid. He did dictate a will of sorts. And the Empress Agrippina asked me to stay over. That was the morning of the chariot race."

"Which Caesar won. A coincidence, no doubt."

Serena was relieved to be able to laugh. "It was a close thing, though. And then afterward, the attempt on Caesar's life. There was a great deal of excitement."

Lady Maxima gave her a side glance. "I understand our friend Tigellinus stepped in the way of the knives. Was he badly hurt?"

A few minutes before, Serena had been ready to confess her own sins. Now cowardice gripped her. She reasoned frantically that the senior vestal had too many problems already and shouldn't be burdened with still another.

"In the leg and between the ribs, Xenophen tells me. The assassin was an unlucky bettor who had thrown everything on the Red faction. The Red charioteer was killed in a pileup with the Blue."

"Did you hear what happened to the assassin?"

"No. Tigellinus questioned him, though, before the physician arrived."

"He was crucified as a lesson to other would-be assassins. Serena, tell me something."

Prepared for the worst, a disclosure of her relationship with Tigellinus, Serena said without expression, "Certainly, my lady."

"Do you believe Nero ordered the murder of the late emperor?"

Relieved, she answered honestly, "I don't know. I hope not. I like him."

Lady Maxima shrugged. "It's no business of ours, I suppose, since he has proved to be a better ruler."

"He is enormously popular with the people. More liberal

and democratic than they are used to. Which is why the Senate hates him, as anyone can see."

"The Senate muddled along making our laws for hundreds of years," Lady Maxima reminded her tartly. "However, all this gossip about Nero poisoning the old emperor must have started in some high place, so I suppose the Senate is responsible. Who else would want to destroy Nero's power?"

Who else indeed? While a tiny suspicion buzzed in Serena's brain, the senior vestal went on, "I am glad he has ended this nonsense about failing to sign death warrants. The death of that Red-faction assassin should open the way to more discipline, as befits Romans. We are not weaklings, after all."

"August lady," Serena began, wishing she hadn't been reminded of this, "if Damaris is in serious trouble, we must hope strict discipline won't be applied. How bad is it with her? What has she been guilty of?"

The older woman sighed. "It began the day you left. Damaris behaved very oddly. She returned from duty taking down the will of old Senator Messalinus Casca's widow—who died of lung sickness the next night, by the way—and she was in a very depressed state. One of my maids tells me she overheard Damaris praying to holy Vesta in the temple, asking her to mend matters between Damaris and her cousin Leander Pella. They had quarreled, it seems. Leander was the dying widow's physician. Perhaps he scolded Damaris over some trifle, and her feelings were hurt."

No, thought Serena. Poor Damaris was jealous because Leander escorted another woman to Baiae. And worse, no doubt. Leander may have ended whatever relationship existed between them. Serena ventured in a gingerly way, "What did she do after the prayer to Vesta?"

"She failed to appear for grain duty the next morning. No one knows where she was. She seems to have walked about the streets until she was exhausted and returned to the house. We put her to bed—she mentioned your name several times. For some reason, she seemed to blame you for her troubles. Her thoughts were quite incoherent. What could she possibly blame you for?"

That infernal Leander Pella must have hinted that he "loved" me, Serena decided, but didn't say so aloud. Naturally, a girl Damaris' age, in the throes of her first idyllic love, would not reason that Leander's pursuit of Serena was somehow a political necessity.

"Her cousin escorted me to Baiae. Or at least, that was his task. Damaris loves her cousin's company. She admires him greatly. So she was undoubtedly jealous. If she only knew that young man!"

Lady Maxima demanded suspiciously, "What do you mean by that? What is there about him?"

"He is ambitious, and I think he would sell almost anything, including himself, to win the favor of the imperial family."

"Gods! How do you know?"

"If I'm not mistaken, someone in the imperial family persuaded him to seduce me."

Lady Maxima stood up. "But it could destroy you. Why?" And then she thought she knew the answer. "Is this a part of their persecution against you because you were present at the emperor's death? Are they still hounding you for that?"

Serena had never felt more guilty at this half-truth. "Well . . . the empress dislikes me."

"Agrippina, of course."

"Both Agrippina and Octavia, as a matter of fact. What did Damaris do?"

The senior vestal admitted, "She disappeared increasingly often. Several days ago Justitia went to rework a will in a house on the edge of the Subura. It was in the evening. The Thracian woman, her slave, took out a basin of slops from the sick man. Down the street she saw a young female coming out of the rear entrance of a brothel. The girl was Damaris. She was sure of it."

"Ridiculous! Forgive me, but she saw her 'down the street'—it might have been anyone."

"So I thought. I was indignant. I warned the Thracian I would have her sold into the Sicilian tin mines if she lied to me. I have never been so angry."

If the story only ended here! But it didn't. Serena understood that before Lady Maxima completed her grim little tale.

"I myself—I am loath to admit it—I began to follow Damaris. It was quite hideously true. I sent one of our male slaves into the place. It seems there are women who . . . well, they allow men to examine them at arm's length and . . . and choose . . ." She covered her face with one hand. The other reached out, groping blindly for the fountain. As if those cold, sparkling waters would destroy a soiled memory.

To shake her out of this despondent mood, Serena said brusquely, "Where is she now? How many others know of this?"

Lady Maxima waved her hand, from which the fountain's water was still dripping. "My chamber. I blush to confess, a pair of our own servants are guarding the door. Frankly, I no longer know what to do with her."

Serena started toward the senior vestal's quarters, turned to ask again, "What others know about Damaris? This is the most important question to consider. You realize that."

"I believe . . . the other vestals. Justitia and the Thracian talked. It was to be expected. That means their slaves know, but the testimony of slaves can only be taken under torture, of course." She rubbed her forehead, which apparently ached with the pressure of her great and terrible problem.

"Outside the household. Think, my lady! The soldiers guarding the temple from violators, do they know?"

"Gossip, perhaps. I don't think . . . I cannot say."

To sting her into action, Serena asked her, "If this became known, would the law against Damaris actually be carried out?"

Lady Maxima looked at her. "Rome is just. It is too much to ask compassion as well."

Why not? Serena asked silently, but went on to the senior vestal's quarters. She knocked several times, calling to Damaris. Two elderly male slaves stood in the passage on either side of the bolted door. Until Serena's arrival they had been slouching in boredom against the exquisite blue-and-cream murals showing vestal virgins at their sacred tasks. At sight of Serena they straightened up and pulled at the wrinkled skirts of their tunics. Before calling Damaris again, she dismissed the slaves. They hesitated, but something in her set countenance warned them. They bowed and removed themselves to the garden, where Lady Maxima backed up Serena's order and sent them to the servants' dining room for their dinner.

Serena tried again, calling to Damaris: "Please let me talk to you. Come to the door. I want to tell you about your cousin Leander."

When there was still no sound inside, she pushed the door open and looked inside Lady Maxima's neat, orderly room. She had thought it possible that Damaris might be asleep on the stiff, narrow metal bed with its hard cylindrical pillow and pristine white-and-gold covering. No one was in the

room. Serena was first puzzled, then alarmed. The iron shutters had not been raised to cover the window, and the early-evening breeze blew in through the open embrasure, showing Serena just how Damaris had escaped.

She must be mad. The more often she wandered about the city, the more witnesses would be produced against her.

"Damaris . . . Damaris . . ." Serena whispered. Despair gripped her momentarily. She was still looking out the window in both directions, marveling that the girl could have squeezed her body out that narrow rectangle, when Lady Maxima spoke to her.

"Do you think she has gone again to that . . . place?"

"Who can say? Can we send one of the males of the household?"

Lady Maxima moved closer to her. "I thought we might explain one visit, which two of my own slaves know about. Damaris might have gone there to help someone who had been taken ill or wished to write a will. But if we send slaves again and again, they will be dangerous witnesses against her."

Considering her movements rapidly, Serena said, "I'll take Hagar. I'll borrow some of her clothing. Is there any male slave we can trust?"

"Whether we trust them or not, torture would make them talk."

"Even if it didn't, we can't put them in such danger. Hagar is very tough, and so am I. We will go prepared."

With Lady Maxima's many warnings still ringing in her ears, Serena left with Hagar, both women heavily shrouded in gray mantles and hoods which they wore over gowns of dull brown such as slaves wore for menial tasks. Serena's distinctive vestal coiffure had been taken apart, her hair combed into one long braid. Partly due to this and partly to her concern over the young vestal's disastrous course, her face looked older and more severe. There was little likelihood that anyone who did not know her would guess her prestigious role in the imperial religion.

To calm the suspicions of the vestal household, Lady Maxima set everyone to work, saw to it that Lady Justitia and one of the youngest vestals hurried over to their duty at the altar in the Temple of Vesta, and herself tried not to display her secret terrors.

Serena and Hagar started off through the winter twilight, with the slave woman grumbling all the way.

# 21

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Serena said "Be quiet!" once and shushed her another time, but the truth was, her thoughts traveled far from Hagar's complaints. As a practical woman, Serena asked herself how Damaris could lie her way out of the terrible danger of accusation and punishment. Serena wasn't certain whether the pontifex maximus, chief priest of Rome's most sacred goddess, could or would demand a medical examination of the girl.

"Or of myself," she added aloud, aware that if the dreadful time came, it could be proved that Serena also was no longer a virgin. It would be the worst of sins against the chaste goddess, and even more sacrilegious, because Roman superstition held that any sin against Vesta would turn the wrath of the goddess upon Rome itself. The little hut inhabited by Rome's ancient king, Numa, or, some said, a clever imitation, was still a sacred relic inside the Temple of Vesta.

Hagar demanded, "What did you say?" and then rambled on with her own complaint. "Crossing the Forum was bad enough, but going into the Subura is foolhardy. In fact, this whole trip is fool's work. What are we to do when we find her? Drag her back by her hair?"

"Nothing quite so obvious. The entire affair may be a mistake. Lady Damaris went to this place, foolishly, I admit, to help someone."

"And the second time, and any other times?"

"Wills are not always concluded at one visit, as I know very well."

The Subura district loomed ahead of them, the street curving on up toward the rich senatorial and equestrian homes on the Esquiline Hill.

"There's the shop of that foul poisoner Locusta," Hagar said, pointing to the building Serena remembered from her visit over two years ago to the house of Damaris' uncle.

Serena muttered, "I wish I knew what she knows about the emperor's poisoning. We may depend on it, whoever committed the act—if it was murder—had help from Locusta."

Hagar shivered at the idea of getting any closer to the notorious Locusta. "You'll not go near that creature. It'd be worse than what we're doing now, which is bad enough. The gods be witness!"

"Don't concern yourself. I've no intention of compromising myself any further with the imperial family. Where do we go from here?"

"Up on the corner there. Not on Locusta's side. That three-story tenement. The two floors above are supposed to be sleeping cubicles for travelers. So they say."

"Hagar, you are a born cynic."

"I've lived a few years, my lady."

Serena laughed shortly. She didn't feel amused, but her nerves demanded a release, especially as the two women were approaching the sinister building whose tiny, high-placed window embrasures were covered by heavy iron shutters. Spelling out the matter more clearly to Serena, two burly males, whose bloodstained clothing announced their jobs at the cattle forum on the Tiber, were just entering the corner door of the brothel.

"There must be a kitchen door, or a side door of some kind. Didn't they say Lady Damaris was seen at a side door?"

Serena couldn't remember the exact words. Now that they had reached their destination, the impact of her mission hit the vestal. She was filled with revulsion at the idea of venturing into a place like this. She looked around at the dark street. No women were about. A noisy, drunken trio of young aristocrats strutted along the cross street a block away. One of them pointed up toward the crowded tenements lining the Subura. There was a loud-voiced discussion.

"Gods!" Hagar whispered. "I hope they don't come up here."

Serena shared her prayer. It was well known that the *vigili* of the night watch never dared to arrest the young aristocrats whose tricks against unfortunate passersby were sometimes cruel and always humiliating. The rioters went on, however, leaving the Subura in its silent darkness, which was shattered by sudden male laughter and the joking remark from a shrill-voiced woman somewhere inside the brothel.

"Wait here, my lady," Hagar suggested. "I'll go through

the alley. The Thracian woman saw Lady Damaris somewhere around that door, I think."

And inside the brothel, as well, Serena thought, remembering the senior vestal's report with sinking hopes. But Hagar bustled into the shadows toward a flame in a protective metal reflector over the side door. Serena heard footsteps coming down from the Esquiline Hill to the area where the street became the Subura. The familiar grating of heavy sandals on cobblestones warned her, and she shrank into the darkness between the brothel and a locked and shuttered tenement.

Suddenly Hagar hissed to her, and she wrapped herself tightly in the dark mantle as she followed Hagar to the side door of the brothel. It was not bolted. The two women squeezed in through the partially open door. Hagar whispered, "Here's a passage. The kitchen is beyond on the left. The main room is on the right. It's a tavern. There's a staircase at the end of the passage, and the men use it to go upstairs with their whores."

"Hagar!"

"Well, what else are they?"

Serena let that stand unchallenged. "The . . . patrons must choose their women in the tavern area. The main room. If only we could see the females without going into the tavern sector."

"You dare not be seen in the tavern or you'll get worse than you got from the Praetorians at that country inn."

Feeling too self-conscious to discuss that tender subject, Serena agreed silently. She and Hagar barely had time to hide in an alcove behind a jar of the vinegary wine called posca before the innkeeper crossed the passage from the tavern's main room to the kitchen.

The women were still hidden when a man and woman came from the main room into the passage and started toward the rickety staircase and the upstairs cubicles. By the dim flicker of light from somewhere at the top of the staircase Serena saw that the man, big and muscular, with a bloodstained tunic, was one of the two butchers from the cattle forum that she had seen entering the brothel earlier. She would have thought little about it except that Hagar nudged her arm as a signal, and Serena studied more closely the slim young hip-swinging whore with him. Her luxuriant dark hair, hanging free about her shoulders, should have warned Serena. The whore was Damaris.

Serena stifled a gasp of shock and disillusionment. Until this second she had believed Damaris was in some emotional turmoil, not meaning any of this, hating what she did and doing it only out of some perverse desire to punish Leander. But this girl seemed to like her massive patron. She clung to one of his thick bare arms and murmured loud enough for the hidden watchers to hear: "I adore your muscles. How do you get them that big?"

The butcher obviously enjoyed the fawning of this pretty, delicate creature. "It's the sacrificial bulls that does it, sweetness. Not many people eats the beef, of course, but we get a lot of calls from the temples. You don't get muscles from tossing around the fish, and kid and poultry. They're only for eating. I had to wrestle down a runaway bull last month. Spent the Saturnalia holidays flat on my back after he gored me."

Damaris giggled. "Can I see where he gored you?"

"That you'll see for sure, little lady. You couldn't miss it, considering what you and I are going upstairs for. I'll let you touch it if you're a good girl."

"I'm always good. Try me. You'll see."

Serena closed her eyes. She would have liked to close her ears as well. She was aware of a sour nausea in her throat. She started to move out of her hiding place, bent upon challenging Damaris and the butcher as they went up the stairs, but Hagar stopped her. A man came down the stairs, passing Damaris and the butcher. By the light at the top of the stairs his face was briefly caught in profile. The face of a Roman of substance, oddly familiar to Serena. She caught at Hagar's hand, squeezed it until the older woman grimaced.

Damaris and her patron were gone. Serena heard a door close upstairs. The man with the hard, familiar face and haunted eyes had already passed her when she recognized him.

"Lycon!"

The man swung around, his hand on a dirk stuck through the sash that shortened his tunic.

"Who is it? You are mistaken. My name is Thaddeus."

Serena ignored Hagar's restraining hand. She came to the man, lowered the hood from her head. "I was once, for one moment in your life, the best friend you had, Lycon."

He stared at her, his eyes more haunted than ever. "I deny it. You have the wrong man. . . . Who are you? Not one of

the women here. No. Not with that face. Who . . . ?" He caught his breath. "August lady!" He glanced around, his confusion at finding her in this place no greater than Hagar's.

"My lady! How do you happen to know a man who patronizes brothels?"

Serena waved aside Hagar's complaint. She was enormously relieved at this meeting with the murderer whose life she had saved the night Emperor Claudius died in the Palatine banquet hall.

"You can help me if you will, Lycon."

"Anything, my lady. Even to my life. I owe that to you anyway."

"No. You earned it by tasting the emperor's food." He started to say something, and she held up one hand. "I'll forget your name if you will forget mine. Neither of us should be found here. You were banished from the empire by the prefect of police, and I . . . as Hagar says, I shouldn't be here either."

By mutual consent she and Lycon stepped over behind the wine jars to talk while Hagar remained on guard in front of them, listening for any interruptions. Lycon bent to kiss Serena's hands, but she brought him quickly back to the present.

"A young female whose welfare concerns me has run mad. She was enticed here and isn't aware of what is expected of her in this place. Can you bring her to some room where I may talk with her?"

"Easily, my lady. In my own room upstairs. I returned to Rome in secret to check on the agent who has been settling my properties. I took a room here because I thought no one in my former life would think to look for me here."

She assured him, "I have already forgotten your name."

"You are too good. Where is the young female? Must I put a knife in anyone in order to rescue her?" He clapped a hand to his dagger, and she felt quite sure he was capable of doing just that.

"No, I devoutly hope not. You passed her on the stairs. The beautiful young brunette with the man from the cattle forum."

Apprehensively, she noted his surprised reaction before he agreed. "The lovely black-haired creature. Yes. I know . . . that is, I've seen her before. I mean . . . well, it's easy enough to do as you wish. But we don't want anyone to see

you here, my lady. You could use my room to talk with her. It's not much of a room, but . . ."

"I understand, and I can't thank you enough."

With Hagar muttering objections to herself, both women followed Lycon up the stairs and into a tiny cubicle of a room at the far end of the hall. There was a narrow cot across the back wall, hardly wide enough for one man alone, much less two lovers, Serena thought. The walls were curiously decorated, as if some artist had tried to create a mural, and failing, painted out half of it. The furnishings were ornate, an unusual, high-backed chair and a low marble taboret. The small window opening had been sealed, probably for the entire winter season, by heavy shutters.

Lycon left the two women and went down the hall past several doors where voices and sounds could be heard, indicating that the other rooms were occupied.

"Don't you listen to them, my lady!" Hagar ordered her fiercely. "It's bad enough you being in this place at all."

Serena laughed. She had grown more and more nervous over the prospect of coaxing Damaris out of this vile place, and the old slave's concern that Serena herself should retain her virginal innocence seemed absurd in the circumstances.

Lycon knocked, and a door opened down the hall. For a minute Serena was puzzled. The male voice demanding to know what the intruder wanted was not that of the butcher from the cattle forum, but another, gruffer and deeper voice. Hagar whispered, "Holy mother Vesta! She's got both of those men with her."

She had scarcely gotten this out of the side of her mouth when Serena heard the sensual, lascivious female voice she recognized with despair as belonging to Damaris. She was speaking to Lycon.

"Leave us alone, can't you? I'll come to you later. Now, close the door."

Lycon's voice sounded more firm than Serena felt. "I don't take whores to my bed. You've got a friend looking for you, and I'm here to make sure she sees you."

The butcher who had gone up the stairs with Damaris made objections. "Look here, you've got the wrong girl. Maris is a Corinthian freedwoman. She's got a right to bed down with whoever she pleases. And she pleases us, eh, Glau-cus?"

The other butcher started to agree, but something cut him

off. Damaris' voice sounded nearer now. Serena opened the door wider and looked out. Down at the end of the hall where Lycon stood in a belligerent pose, Damaris had elbowed her way between her butcher patrons and Lycon.

"What's this? Who wants to see me? Is it an old woman, very regal-looking? Tell her I've died. She tried to keep me locked up. Can you imagine?"

"No. A young lady. A lady with golden hair."

Damaris had turned away with one hand on the arm of her butcher friend. She looked back now, peered down the hall through the murky light. Serena didn't move. She tried not to look too severe. It was clear that Damaris had been shocked.

"You!"

One of the men tried to draw her back into the room, but she shrugged him off. Her single garment, a yellow gown too short for propriety, had slipped off the glowing flesh of her shoulder. Automatically she covered her shoulder again. Serena thought she looked more pale than usual, but it may have been the bad light.

"Yes," she said, moving gracefully down the hall in her bare feet. "I have something to say to that lady."

Confused and angry, the two butchers argued between themselves, ignoring Lycon, and then retreated into their cubicle of a room. Serena held out her hand to Damaris, who ignored it and strode past her and past Hagar to sit on the edge of the bed with her hands clasped in an almost masculine fashion around one knee.

"Well, Serena, I'm waiting. You do have an excuse for stealing the affections of the only man I will ever love?"

Hagar bristled. "Don't you talk sacrilege like that to my lady, you . . . you . . ."

"Hush, Hagar. Damaris deserves the truth." Serena sat down beside the girl, who drew away to avoid physical contact with her. Still, it seemed to Serena that Damaris was more defiant than indifferent. Hurt and angry, thinking the great emotion of her life had been cruelly destroyed, she had reacted wildly in the way she thought would most keenly hurt those who had failed her. Purity and morality were watchwords in the conduct of the vestals. So she would strike hardest at these very qualities.

"Well," Damaris snapped insolently, "what is the truth?" But in spite of her belligerence, it seemed to Serena that her

great dark eyes looked darker than ever, with deep shadows beneath, as if she struggled against a debilitating illness.

Serena was firm and quiet.

"Leander Pilla is ambitious. He will do anything to oblige either the emperor or the empress. One of them is my enemy. Leander was told to try to make love to me. To ruin me, in fact. He tried because he was desperate to please his patron, whoever she—or he—was."

"And my lady slapped his face and sent him about his business," Hagar put in.

Damaris appeared to despise Serena's explanation, but Hagar's angry words had the sound of truth. Damaris scowled at the loyal slave woman.

"Why would Serena slap him? Why would any woman do that to the most beautiful man in Rome?"

"Because," Serena put in, beginning to lose her own temper, "I haven't the least interest in the most beautiful man in Rome. I tell you, he is working for one of the empresses, who wants to compromise me to my death. If he loves any woman, it is probably you. Personally, I think he has only one great love. Himself."

Damaris sprang to her feet. "How dare you! You don't know what it is like to be in his arms, to know his kisses, his body."

Serena agreed. "No. I don't . . . do I?"

The girl whirled around, pressed her fingers to her temples. "I don't know what to believe. If you really had been his lover, you couldn't talk about him so calmly." With glittering eyes she stared down at Serena. "He told me he had to be with you. He said it was necessary. I thought he meant that your power made it necessary. I couldn't believe a woman wouldn't love him if she had the chance."

"You can believe my lady. I am her witness, and I'll say this, Lady Damaris! You'd better not be telling *me* I'm in love with that young whelp."

Damaris burst into laughter with a tinge of hysteria. The full impact of what she had done came over her. Serena touched her, tried to comfort her, but she gasped out in the midst of her laughter, "Holy Vesta! You can't imagine the sins I have committed against my vestal oath. Leander will despise me now. I am unclean, unfit to love him."

Serena did not remind her that she was even more unfit to

serve the goddess. Her own conscience troubled her too much on that score.

Hearing footsteps and muffled voices somewhere below the stairs, together with a distinct feminine laugh like a titter, Serena asked hurriedly, "Will you come back with us tonight?"

"How can I? They won't want me. No one will want me."

"Lady Maxima does. And I do. For your own safety, the sooner we get back to the house, the better."

Damaris started to embrace Serena, then stopped, humbled by a sudden look at her dirty, stained yellow gown.

"I'll get my own clothes. I was so bitter, so sick when I ran away a week ago, that I took one of my vestal gowns. I scrubbed that room down the hall with the gown. I wanted to degrade it." She laughed again, a quick, breathless sound that was like a sob. "I only degraded myself." She went to the door, looked back as Serena started to follow.

"Damaris, I'll go with you. You don't want to face those two men alone."

"Ha! You think I am afraid of them? I'll simply lie to them. I know their kind well after a week." She slipped out into the passage.

Hagar held Serena back. "She's right, my lady. Besides, you don't want them seeing you."

"What does that matter? It would be my word against theirs."

"But don't you see? If they ever identify Lady Damaris, she can deny it. If they see both of you now, and then again together at some religious ceremony, they will know you both for certain."

It was true. Serena still had her hand on the door latch when it swung inward with a rush and Lycon was inside the room with them, red-faced with excitement.

"My lady! I didn't think I'd get a chance to repay you so soon. There are three men of the *vigili* downstairs. An old woman is with them. She seems to be from the Vestals' House. They are asking questions about your pretty friend."

"Lady Justitia's Thracian slave! She always was jealous of Lady Damaris. She must have called the police," Hagar cried. "Oh, my lady, what can we do?"

Serena looked to the capable Lycon for advice. "Is there any other way out?"

"An old staircase, pretty badly kept, but used by people like me who don't dare meet the police. Come!"

"We must get Damaris. She is the one in greatest danger."

He hesitated. "I'll get her. Go into that room across the passage."

"No. Your danger is as great as Damaris'. I'll go."

But she had no say in the matter. He pushed her and Hagar out into the passage. Hagar fumbled over the door opposite, found the latch, and opened it, pulling Serena with her. Serena heard voices at the top of the stairs. Frantically she called the first syllables of Damaris' name, but was silenced by Lycon's hand over her mouth.

"Quiet!" he whispered. "You betray her name to them."

She hadn't thought of that, and being silenced, allowed herself to be pulled to safety on a narrow flight of worn and rickety stairs which plunged downward into darkness. Knowing no further way to help Damaris, Serena felt her way down the stairs. After a minute or two, sick with worry, she heard Lycon's steps behind her. Obviously, he had not been able to warn Damaris.

The rotten wood in one of the steps gave way, and Hagar's foot crashed through. Serena felt amid the darkness, and with Lycon's help got the old woman to her feet again. Throughout these frantic seconds no one said a word. Almost immediately after, Lycon found the door latch that opened on an alley so narrow that Lycon, a heavy man, had to suck in his stomach and move at an angle in order to squeeze out to the street.

Only just in time they reached the street and mingled with a dozen drunken wedding guests all staggering homeward and not too certain where home was. Behind them in the tiny alley, one of the *vigili* stood with the Thracian woman who was the slave of Lady Justitia. Due to his heavy breast armor the police official couldn't squeeze out to the street, and after cursing, went back up the broken stairs. The Thracian woman hesitated, uncertain which way to turn, and then followed the officer up the stairs.

Serena said firmly, "I must see Damaris. I must stop them when they bring her out. Otherwise, if they aren't challenged, they may take her to that frightful underground cell in the Tullianum Prison that everyone whispers about."

Hagar was looking too scared to think, but Lycon had considered the matter. "We approach the front from the direc-

tion of the Esquiline Hill. Then you simply say you have been taking down a will and stopped in passing to see what the fuss was all about."

"Your hair, my lady. No vestal would go out in public without the sacred coiffure." Having found some way she could help, Hagar wound Serena's one long braid of hair several times above her brow line, anchored it with the bodkins she had used in the original braid, and slipped the hood forward over the hair. It now bore a reasonable semblance to the vestal headdress.

"You must walk behind us, an unimportant escort," Serena ordered Lycon. "We don't want anyone else recognizing you. And when we leave the *vigili*, you must get out of Rome. Fast. Tonight."

He agreed, and they went boldly down the Subura from the direction of the Esquiline Hill, arriving in front of the brothel just as five police arrived in the street with the two butchers from the cattle forum, their wrists bound behind them, and Damaris looking disheveled, bare-legged and pitifully young, her own hands bound before her, with the end of the cord in the fingers of one of the *vigili*. The old Thracian woman was in the vanguard, chuckling.

"That'll teach you to sneer at the innocence of Lady Justitia. That'll teach you, harlot that you are!"

One of the police turned to her. "Be quiet, old woman, or I'll ram my fist down your throat." This silenced her for a few seconds, until Serena came upon the group, bringing about her person, even in its old brown mantle, all the majesty of her office.

"Officers, who have you there?"

"Sinners guilty of sacrilege. And who may you be, woman?"

Hagar bustled to the front. "Don't you use that tone with a holy vestal. My lady has been up on the Esquiline recording the will of . . ." She broke off, at a loss. Calmly Serena picked up where the loyal slave left off.

"The distinguished Pella family in that mansion you see on the hill. But you have committed sacrilege yourself, officer. Isn't this one of our sacred six? She was sent here to take the will of a man named . . . Thaddeus. Lady Damaris, how do you happen to be in this disgraceful condition?" She prayed that Damaris, dazed and scared as she was, would take up the story Serena offered.

"Yes, yes," Damaris babbled at once. "I couldn't find Thaddeus. And then, it was almost dark in the halls, and they thought I was there for . . . for a different purpose. They didn't know me. They tore my gown and . . ." How was she to explain the short yellow harlot's gown without letting them suspect she had already been sexually used, which was an offense punishable by death whether she had been a willing or unwilling partner?

"Where is her stylus, her papyrus and tablets?" demanded the Thracian woman.

"I lost them. I was so frightened." Damaris' bound hands caressed the officer's fingers in panic. With her big eyes and her hair a dark halo around her head, she was beautiful enough to soften the heart of a much tougher man. "Those gentlemen . . ." She pointed her elbow at the dumbfounded butchers. "They helped me when I ran from the patrons of that place. Officer, I was only carrying out my duty as a vestal when I came here."

Serena's hopes were raised by Damaris' spirited defense. She herself was careful to remain quiet but firm. "Roman law clearly states that a vestal may order the freedom of a prisoner."

The Thracian woman protested, "Not when it's a vestal crime. This creature shames my Lady Justitia and all vestals. She should—"

"Don't tell me my business, you old harridan!" the officer shouted, the more angry because he had almost let himself be convinced by Serena. Resuming a respectful demeanor, he reminded Serena, "It's true, august lady. This involves the crime of sacrilege. I can't let the . . . the prisoner go free." One of his fellow *vigili* whispered something to him, and he brightened.

"We might leave the prisoner in the custody of the Vestals' House until the pontifex maximus can make a judgment on her innocence or guilt."

"Maybe the Lady Serena was the woman we chased out the rear of that place," the Thracian woman put in, obviously hoping that the removal of the vestal nearest the Lady Maxima would give her own mistress a boost up the ladder.

"Silence, you!" commanded the officer in charge. "I'll have no more disrespect to the noble lady."

"Noble lady!" the Thracian began, but one of the *vigili* cuffed her across the side of the head, and the woman sub-

sided, muttering to Hagar, "You'll see. For all her tricks, your precious mistress won't save that harlot." Hagar kicked her hard, and the men all laughed. The Thracian, showing her teeth, got out of reach of them all but was by no means silenced.

"I'll have the truth about your precious Lady Serena for this. You wait! She's no pure and noble goddess. I'll show you what she really is."

Somewhat pale after this succession of threats both to Damaris and to herself, Serena was not consoled by the friendly officer's assurance, "Don't you worry, august lady. There's nothing she can bring against an innocent vestal virgin. It's just talk."

*If only it were just talk!*

Serena nodded, thanked him, and took Hagar's arm. The old woman was trembling. The realization disturbed Serena as much as the Thracian's promise of trouble.

Serena remembered her mother vaguely as a worried but restrained young beauty, deeply absorbed in her husband's diplomatic career. Serena admired the memory. After all, her mother had heroically died at her husband's side in the Teuton raid. But when "mothers" were extolled, Serena had very early imagined a true mother as someone combining the best features of the goddess Vesta and the senior vestal, Maxima. It was painful now to watch the older woman's sufferings, although many days had gone by since the arrest of Damaris, and the girl remained a well-treated prisoner in the Vestals' House.

"Dearest Lady Maxima, you are absolutely not to worry," Serena told her passionately one bright day in February when the older woman's haunted look became more than Serena could bear. "They say the pontifex maximus is returning to the city from the north in a few days. It will all be settled then. He's a very old man. Very gentle. You know how he is."

Lady Maxima was superintending the slave girl who polished the many statues circling the atrium. She studied the austere marble features above her as she remarked thoughtfully, "I wonder how *she* would have handled Damaris. Somewhere, I made a terrible mistake, and she must pay for it. I can't even ask the goddess to help her."

"I don't believe it. Excuse me, my lady, but I think you are too hard on holy Vesta. And on yourself. Someone will help Damaris."

Would Tigellinus return to Rome with Nero in time to help Damaris? In spite of her suspicions that the emperor had murdered his stepfather, she still felt instinctively that he might help Damaris, to oblige Tigellinus, if for no other reason. She had sent several messages to Tigellinus herself but received no reply. Each letter, carried by a vestal slave, was

extremely circumspect. It contained nothing that would link them in anything except the fate of an "innocent" young vestal and contained Lady Maxima's plea as well as her own for Tigellinus to enlist the emperor's help.

Lady Justitia, wan and wraithlike as always, drifted into the atrium with complaints about the treatment of her body slave, the Thracian woman.

"The other servants will not sit with her at meals. And the food that is given to her!" She sighed, waved her frail arms aimlessly. "If we were not in this sacred house I would say they are trying to poison her. She was sick to her stomach all last night. So inconvenient for me!"

"For you?" Serena repeated on a note of irony.

"Yes. You know how I am seized with spells of faintness many times in the night. It was typical of her thoughtless habits. She made very little effort to help me."

Serena and the senior vestal exchanged glances, sharing a mutual thought. Serena realized it was for this completely self-centered young woman that the old Thracian had uncovered Damaris' secret, and in the end might be responsible for the death of Damaris and of Serena as well. The three goddesses of man's fate worked strangely indeed.

"Well, Lady Justitia, what else did you want?" Lady Maxima asked coldly. "We are very busy this morning."

Justitia yawned as she extended a hand. "Letters from an imperial messenger, noble lady. And also, the *vigili* guarding Lady Damaris' door and window are requesting more bread and less meat in their diet. They regard themselves as the equal of legionaries in the field and they say it is well known that legionaries are allowed to have three times as much bread as meat, which is how they prefer it as well."

Lady Maxima said impatiently, "See to it, then." Ignoring the young vestal, who left the atrium with her usual languid grace, followed by the little slave with her polishing cloths, Maxima showed the thin scrolls to the anxious Serena. The latter's eyes had been fixed upon the letters since Justitia first revealed them. Surely, at last, Tigellinus was able to answer her frantic appeals!

Unable to wait any longer, Serena blurted out, "Who are they from? Is one of them from . . . ? Has he persuaded the emperor to help Damaris?"

Lady Maxima had unrolled the left end of the first scroll and read aloud: "The Empress Julia Agrippina, Augusta of

Rome, to the noble Lady Maxima, greetings. If you are well, it is well with me.' "

Serena gasped at Agrippina's name. "Then it is nothing to do with Damaris. The empress bears me no goodwill, and she will hate Damaris because of me."

"Wait." Lady Maxima opened the other. "This is better: 'Philip Sofonius Tigellinus to the august and noble Lady Maxima.' " On a note of encouragement she read the rest of the formal salutation before looking at Serena. "'Greetings. If you are well, it is well with me.' "

With her pulse beating rapidly, Serena urged her, "Read on. That's the answer to our plea for help."

In better spirits the senior vestal resumed, her voice faltering, however, as she proceeded: "'The emperor made up his mind at a moment's notice and is off to Greece to sing in the Olympian competitions. His bodyguard of Praetorians accompanies him. And by imperial order, I am included, looking absurd enough. A Praetorian far too big to be seen leaning on crutches and hobbling about in the vanguard of the procession. I wish I might be elsewhere.'

"I therefore dictate this from Brindisium as we await the galley that carries us to Greece. August lady, Caesar thanks you for sending to Baiae the noble Lady Serena, whose love and devotion to those who need her are such that—as Caesar says—no man can properly thank her. We return to Rome as soon as Caesar's musical triumphs are inscribed for all to see. Meanwhile, we pray you to guard the Lady Serena well for her beauty and many other exquisite qualities. Caesar wishes it known that we shall make sacrifice to the gods for her well-being and yours. Farewell, august lady.' " She smiled grimly. "I have the feeling, Serena, that he says one word for me and six for you. And all those not-too-subtle references to Caesar's devotion to you—I think we may read Tigellinus' name there. If it were not that we need Caesar so desperately, I would say the best thing that could happen would be for Tigellinus to remain in Greece."

Serena ignored this. In other circumstances she would have adored the letter, her first love letter, even though it had to be written so obliquely to provide protection against danger. But all she could think of now was that Tigellinus and Nero would both be out of Rome at the time of Damaris' trial. It was an appalling prospect.

"He never received my letters about Damaris."

Lady Maxima agreed. "That is evident. I am almost afraid to read the other letter, if what you tell me about the empress is true." She unrolled the first thin scroll again. "'Julia Agrippina to . . .' I read that. Let's see: 'The enclosed letter from Tigellinus, the new Praetorian prefect, to you, noble Maxima, happened to come into my hands. The imperial mail service delivered all of my son's official mail to me, and this was among the reports. It is self-explanatory. You will see that other matters have taken my son away from Rome just when he is needed to witness the investigation of the vestal who has shamed the holy order.' Gods above!" Lady Maxima exclaimed. "Our poor Damaris is condemned before she is tried!"

Frantic with suspense, Serena asked, "What else does she say? Who is to rule in Caesar's absence?"

"She says, 'My son has provided me with two advisers in his absence, Seneca, the philosopher, and Burrus, the soldier. I need not assure you, I think, that with my long experience in the affairs of Rome, I shall hardly trouble these good fellows, both of whom were given their present high eminence through my own contriving. Be of good hope, then, noble lady. I myself will be in Rome to witness the examination of this Damaris whose crime strikes at the very foundations of Rome itself. Indeed, your own purity of heart may not permit you to realize that others among the heretofore sacred vestals may likewise have permitted themselves to be despoiled.'" Lady Maxima interrupted herself. "What does she mean by that?"

"Go on, please. What else?"

The vestal went on in a voice that ended on a note of heavy, controlled panic. "With the assurance that you may count upon me to deal out justice, I bid you farewell until we meet in the presence of my old and dear friend, the pontifex maximus, *whom I appointed to his present high office.*'"

Lady Maxima's hands were shaking. She dropped the letter, which Serena picked up and reread with passionate hope. Her disordered senses kept telling her the older woman had read it wrongly. But the words were there, blow upon blow. And to cap it all, the chief priest of Rome, who must try the case, owed his very position to Agrippina.

For once Serena felt utterly defeated. Her mouth was dry as she asked, "What are we to do? Is there anyone we can turn to? Any official?"

Maxima tapped the empress's letter against her teeth. In the silent room both women managed to get hold of themselves. Common sense must help them. "And the first advantage we have," Lady Maxima resumed, "is that no one wants to believe a vestal guilty. Superstition is a very powerful ally. In the beginning, in order to preserve the sanctity of the family inheritance, chastity became the prime requisite of a patrician woman. There is the old belief that Rome is cursed with frightful misfortune if a vestal betrays her vows."

Recovering her spirits a little, Serena took up the senior vestal's suggestion. "And no Roman would want to admit the crime, because it automatically puts a curse on Rome. We have only to present reasonable doubt. Everyone should be relieved to seize on that doubt, in order to save Rome."

Lady Maxima took this idea further by testing the feelings of senators, and even members of the Equestrian Order, who had less prestige but in some cases more power and intelligence than the elite Senatorial Order. Serena found it ominous that almost every orator and lawyer they approached was suddenly so wrapped in his own problems and the weighty affairs of the empire that he had no time to argue Damaris' case before the *pontifex maximus*.

On a particularly sunny springlike day the friendly *vigili* guards yielded to the senior vestal's pleas that Damaris be allowed out in the garden of the Vestals' House. The girl spent an hour walking around the fountain among the early-blooming daffodils and irises, very much aware of the armored police, one lounging on an army stool at either end of the peristyle. They couldn't overhear her conversation with Serena and her indignant young supporter, Clea, which was her only consolation, she said.

Serena reminded her of their latest hope. "Lady Maxima and I have sent separate messengers to the imperial party in Greece. One message went to Athens and one to Corinth. If Caesar is anywhere near those cities, the Praetorian prefect, Tigellinus, should help us. He has great influence with Caesar."

"But why does the empress hate me so?" Damaris cried. "Why should she work so hard to destroy me?"

Guiltily Serena confessed, "She wants to hurt me in any way possible. And if she can strike at the Vestal Order, she will be hitting out at me."

"But why?"

It was a question Serena did not dare to answer.

Clea had her own reasons, which she staunchly heralded to the world. "Because you're so pretty, Damaris. That's why those old crows hate you."

Damaris tried to smile, but the fear was too great, too terrible. "I shouldn't have gone to that place. Ever."

"You went because you were summoned to write the will of a man called Thaddeus. What else could you do?" Serena reminded her. Without going into the morals of the case, Lady Maxima and Serena clung to this story until they almost believed it themselves. Instinctively, they knew it was safer this way.

Clea hugged Damaris. "They are sure to free you. It was an outrageous lie your enemies started. That horrid slave of Justitia's was always jealous because people liked you better than Justitia. Who wouldn't? She's so tiresome with her eternal complaints."

Lady Maxima interrupted Damaris' adoring public. "Lady Clea, you have duty at the temple, and according to the water clock in the tablinum, you are already late."

"Yes, noble lady." Clea hurried off.

The senior vestal turned to Serena, took her aside. "Someone is waiting in the tablinum. He wants to see you. He and I agree that no one should know of his visit just yet."

For a glorious minute or two as she made her way to the little library/counting-room, Serena was certain the secret male visitor must be Tigellinus. Somehow he had managed to get one of her messages, and here he was . . .

But her first sight of the short, stout figure in the concealing travel cloak was a slap of disappointment. Seeing that she was alone, the visitor slipped the hood back and showed her Senator Cato's puffed, florid face and shrewd little eyes.

"Forgive me, Lady Serena. I didn't mean to behave like one of those ridiculous disguised actors in the Theater of Marcellus, but I had to see you without any gossip."

"Yes, Senator? How may I help you?" She came into the room, closing the movable screens between the tablinum and the atrium. Still hopeful, she ventured, "Is it about Lady Damaris? We need you so much."

"Not exactly." He looked around, saw nothing threatening in the little room, but motioned her closer, as if spies might be hiding behind the scrolls of books and the many copies of

patrician wills filed here and elsewhere in the Vestals' House. He cleared his throat. "Lady Serena, do you remember the afternoon my friend Senator Lentulus died?"

Puzzled, she agreed that she remembered some of the details.

"Then you cannot have forgotten his last warning to us."

"His last words? So many things have happened since."

He crooked his finger, calling her closer still. Whatever he had to confide seemed to be of earth-shaking importance. "He tried to tell us who was responsible for the murder of the Emperor Claudius, but the prefect of police, Tigellinus, was there, representing the imperial household. Lentulus didn't dare to spell out what he had deduced."

Serena stiffened, preparing to counter an obvious attack on the man she loved. "I remember," she said coldly. "He pointed to the prefect's helmet, a not very subtle accusation against Tigellinus, for which he apparently had no proof."

"Precisely what I thought. But let me digress. Think back. The emperor died in your arms, did he not?"

"I thought so." She added more firmly, "Yes. He died."

"And he showed symptoms of poisoning?"

"Or of gluttony. He almost recovered, as a matter of fact."

"And then?"

"It was all so sudden. He seemed to recover. Then, in a matter of minutes—less time—he had a dreadful seizure and died."

"Immediately before the last seizure, what happened?"

She had been over this in her mind so many times she couldn't imagine what he hoped to discover years after the crime. If crime it was!

"It was suggested that I use a feather to make him disgorge the final dregs of bad mushrooms, or whatever it was."

"Who made the suggestion?"

Serena thought back. "The Empress Agrippina."

He nodded. "From what I can get out of others close to the emperor's couch, that is borne out. Now, who gave you the feather that you put down old Claudius' throat?"

"I don't know. All I can remember is just a hand. I was exceedingly busy." She closed her eyes, trying to live through those suspense-filled minutes again.

Senator Cato urged her, "Eh? Eh?"

"A woman's hand. Long, strong fingers. And . . . I

remember! A ring on the forefinger, with a large amethyst stone." She and the senator stared at each other.

"And who wears a large amethyst on her long, strong finger?"

"Agrippina!" Bewildered, she went on, "But what difference does that make? He was already suffering from the mushrooms. Or the poison."

"Ah, but was he? I am very angry with myself that it took me so long to realize how the poison was administered. Lentulus tried to tell us, but the presence of Agrippina's lover, the prefect of police, prevented him; so he did the only thing he could do, left you and me a clue which—if you will pardon my saying so—we were too stupid to pick up."

She puzzled this out. "He pointed to the prefect's helmet. Are you saying that Tigellinus poisoned the mushrooms? How could he? No one else became sick. They were all served off the same salver."

"No, no, stupid girl! He pointed to the brush plume on the prefect's helmet, the closest thing he could reach that would remind us of the feather Agrippina gave you. *The poison was undoubtedly smeared on the feather.* The emperor was recovering from his stomach upset before you administered the feather—at her suggestion—to purge him. That is why no one else who ate the mushrooms became ill, and yet, the emperor died."

She was stunned. "But for what purpose? She gained nothing. She sacrificed the imperial power as wife to the emperor for a mere position as an emperor's mother."

"Mere? My dear child, for some time now she has been absolute ruler of Rome, even to acquiring the title of 'augusta.' The divine. The all-powerful. It took the great Empress Livia almost a lifetime to become 'augusta.' Agrippina did it in less than two years. She murdered Claudius, probably to prevent his naming his own son to succeed him. She murdered him in order to rule exclusively in Nero's name. And by all the gods, she has succeeded!"

"So that is why she has always been suspicious of me! She has laid any number of traps for me. She won't be happy until I am dead."

"Obviously," he agreed. "As long as you are respected and revered by all of Rome, you could confide what you saw, and some bright lad might put it all together. Next thing she

knew, the Senate would vote themselves the power to bring her down off her lofty throne."

"Even so, Senator, there are only my word and your suspicions. Not enough to bring down the most powerful woman in the empire."

"That's as may be. Is this attack on the Lady Damaris a part of her feud against you?"

She was disingenuous when she seized on this excuse to obtain his services. "She is only using Damaris because she can't reach me. And she is willing to bring Rome down around her ears to do it."

"Good phrase, that. I'll use it. Point out the disaster to Rome if a vestal were found guilty. Then show the young lady's innocence. She is innocent, I assume."

Serena hesitated only long enough to swallow hard, pray silently, "Dear good Vesta, forgive me," before she said proudly, "Of course she is! But the circumstances were unfortunate. She foolishly set out for the Subura to record the will of a man named Thaddeus." Improvising after the startling news that Agrippina was a murderer, she went on boldly, "The man Thaddeus had left earlier. The whole thing must have been a trap. Poor Damaris was made to appear a prostitute."

"Hm. I've heard rumors that the Lady Damaris visited the brothel several times."

"Very true. As I say, this Thaddeus sent for her several times, yet she never found him. I happen to know he fled the city the night we arrived at the brothel and is now somewhere in the Near East. But at all events, that same night the Lady Justitia's slave woman brought the police."

"As if she knew a trap was to be sprung. Well, torture may bring out the truth."

She wanted very much to lie about the Thracian woman, whom she feared and detested, but not even defense of Damaris would permit her to put the evil old woman in danger of torture and death.

"I think the Thracian woman is sincere in her belief."

"A pity. We could have demanded that the pontifex maximus put her to the question and had the truth in no time."

"No!"

He shrugged, only a little disappointed. "No matter. The thing is to see if we can find a tie between the empress's per-

secution of you and this obvious entrapment of Lady Damaris."

She felt that he was bounding forward in his effort to punish the imperial murderer, and the Empress Agrippina was not only far too dangerous but far too powerful to be attacked until the evidence was secure. If she had the slightest hint of what Senator Cato intended, the senator might be murdered even before the trial. Serena had learned never to underestimate Agrippina.

"Please listen to me, Excellency. I know that woman. No one in the world is more dangerous. Be very, very careful. If you investigate the emperor's death, remember that the person you suspect could destroy us both with one finger."

"Quite right." He tapped her own fingers playfully. She had the feeling that he took her warning much too lightly. "You may convey to the noble Lady Maxima that I will defend the pretty Damaris before the pontifex, before Agrippina or Nero, or the gods themselves, and in doing so, I hope to bring down that Medusa who sits on the throne."

"This is Rome. We have no throne."

"You think not? Any camp chair in which Agrippina sits has become the throne. You may believe I'll be cautious. I have vivid reminders of what happened to my good friend Lentulus." He covered his head again and started out toward the atrium, saying as he went, "But I am gathering in every thread I think may be of use. Who knows? Even that poor luckless puppet, Leander Pella, may be one of the threads leading to the Medusa on the Palatine."

"What!" She hurried after him. "Why do you call him poor and luckless? It's been my observation that he is a singularly lucky young man."

Senator Cato laughed briskly. "Oh, he was probably nothing more than a pretty puppet, but it's my opinion the thing happened because he failed in some mission for Agrippina. At least, I am told several of the empress's slaves were seen leaving the Milvian Bridge where we found him. I'd been over trans-Tiber to the villa of some old friends and was returning when we picked him up."

"Senator! Is the young man ill? Dead? What has happened?"

"Torture, I'd say. Someone wanted him to do something, or confess something, and he couldn't oblige, even under torture. The rack was applied, and hot pincers, I imagine."

Suddenly weak in the knees, Serena reached for the screen as the senator was about to fold it back and let himself out. "How . . . how bad is it?"

"Joints all swollen. He won't walk straight for a long time. An ugly burn down the left side of his face and across his eye and the corner of his mouth. It'll be a long time before he goes out in public, as you might say."

"By Athena Polias! I believe I am the cause. He tried to seduce me in a very amateur way, on my return from Baiae. His heart wasn't in it. He got his face slapped for his efforts."

The senator said grimly, "It won't be the last time a female slaps that poor ugly face of his now. You think someone set him onto seducing you? Why?"

"To destroy me. To bring me to my death."

His pale eyes glittered. "You think the Medusa was behind it?"

"I'd swear it."

"More weapons against her if only we can find the key to using them. It may be I can get a confession out of this Leander Pella."

She walked past the police guard with him. The young officer snapped to attention and saluted the senator. As they crossed the atrium and she prepared to turn him over to the ancient female doorkeeper, she asked, "How is the boy now? Will he recover?"

"Recover? To a degree. He is terrified of everything. As who would not be? He'll walk, think, talk. But he's not going to have the girls swooning at his feet anymore. The days of the handsome young heartbreaker are over."

It was ghastly. A fate worse than death to the ambitious young physician who had used his good looks persistently. The poor young Adonis! Serena knew she did not dare to tell Damaris yet. The unfortunate girl was worried enough already.

Medusa! she thought as the senator left the Vestals' House. He had named the empress well. Everyone who looked upon Agrippina was destroyed in some way.

But one good thing had come out of the senator's visit. She hurried to tell Lady Maxima that they might count upon Senator Cato to defend Damaris before the high priest of Rome and the empress herself. Serena tried to assure herself that so long as the empress did not know of her danger, Senator Cato, Serena, and Damaris were safe. The gods help them if Medusa ever discovered what was in the wind!

On a blustery February day Tullius Servius Lucas, high priest of Rome, the pontifex maximus of the vestal virgins, arrived back in the city from his country home at the northern lakes. Lady Maxima and Serena went with Hagar to visit Senator Cato the following day and spoke with him in his family home overlooking the Aventine Hill. He had come direct from the Senate House, still wore his toga, and looked more dignified and powerful than Serena had thought possible in so rotund a man.

Serena was not as optimistic as the senior vestal. She found herself uncharacteristically depressed over Damaris' fate, so much so that she had been sick to her stomach before leaving the Vestals' House, and to her horror, felt strong symptoms of the same nervous reaction when they reached the senator's home. She controlled her nerves with difficulty.

The senator entertained the anxious ladies in the splendid, cold atrium, serving them frosted fruit drinks with ice brought down from the snow of the mountains. The chill of the atrium with its altars to the Cato senatorial ancestors, and the drink itself, exacerbated Serena's ragged nerves. She wondered why, in view of his news, Senator Cato's attitude, if not his words, should be so surprisingly confident.

"As my messenger told you, the pontifex maximus arrived in the night. At dawn, even before the first hour, he had presented himself to the Empress Agrippina on the Palatine and was paying his respects. Needless to say, she arrived in town yesterday. One may rely upon our Medusa to be everywhere at once and exactly on the hour, as if she carried a water clock in the folds of her palla."

Lady Maxima said in a puzzled way, "I still don't see why the empress should be such a threat to Damaris. She knows nothing against her family. They were on the right side in the Civil Wars."

The senator nodded. "Very true; yet the pontifex will convene the investigation of Lady Damaris immediately. This gives us very little time, but I am still hopeful I may persuade young Leander to speak against the empress. He is eating regularly now and occasionally talks to me. My male servants tell me they have exchanged a few words with him, as well."

"Male?" Serena repeated. "Is he still sensitive about his looks?" She felt a perverse guilt over having been responsible for his failure to carry out the mission assigned him by Agrippina. If, indeed, it could be proved that Agrippina had him tortured for his failure.

"Very sensitive. You must remember, his looks were his whole life. He won't see any woman, not even my slaves, thus far. However, I am hoping I may persuade him to testify to the pontifex maximus about the empress's efforts to ruin you. It would show the presence of a cabal against the vestals."

Serena couldn't imagine anything less likely than that Leander, once tortured, would commit an act which put him in jeopardy again, but seeing Lady Maxima's hopeful expression, she hadn't the heart to express her own opinion.

"Perhaps . . . if he knows how serious it is with Damaris."

The senator got up. "Allow me, noble ladies. I've taken the liberty of having the young man sent for. You may be able to win him over to our cause."

The screens separating the long, splendid marble walls of the atrium from the tablinum were pushed together, leaving an opening for the young man who was carried in a poled chair through the tablinum from the garden beyond. The skylight roof over the shallow pool in the atrium was still closed, and in the greenish shadows he did not at once make out the identity of Senator Cato's guests.

When he saw the women, he rose up in his chair, screaming in panic to the slaves who carried the poles of his chair.

"No. I w-won't stay. T-take me away!" It seemed to be difficult for him to talk now. Serena winced to hear him.

The slaves looked to the senator for their orders, and he said with what Serena thought was heartless ease, "Don't be childish, my boy. You must face women sooner or later. Be brave. Noble ladies, you are acquainted with the physician Leander Pella?"

"Of course!" Lady Maxima greeted the cringing young

man innocently. "The cousin of my dear little friend Lady Damaris. Senator Cato tells us you will be well again."

He avoided looking at her or presenting his full face, but as he turned and twisted to avoid her gaze, he found himself staring directly at Serena. Feeling physically ill, she had stepped into the shadows, hoping he would not need to identify her, for he would certainly be bitter against her. If she had permitted him to make love to her, he would not have been tortured. And she? There was little doubt she would be on trial with Damaris.

His left eye gave him trouble, and he squinted, not recognizing her, and then insisted, "I w-won't stay. I refuse."

The senator was implacable. "Be a good boy. Remember, these holy ladies wish you well. Remain seated, if you please."

While the unhappy young man twisted and squirmed to avoid the light from the tablinum and distant garden, Serena got a good look at him and was shocked at the change in the beautiful golden-haired young Adonis. Hot pincers had caught the flesh at the outer edge of his left eye so that the eye slanted almost shut. The mark of a heavy burn began just under the eye, and made its worst damage to the left corner of his full, almost feminine mouth. For the rest, he might be more himself when his body recovered its youthful elasticity and grace.

Every time Serena glanced, even by accident, at Leander's face, with all the lost beauty so evident, she gritted her teeth and thought of Julia Agrippina with renewed vows of vengeance. No. She amended. Of justice.

Lady Maxima was still trying to win over the wounded man, but he remained hysterical and adamant. Then the vestal mentioned Damaris.

"You may very possibly save the life of your cousin Damaris. You have only to appear at her trial before the pontifex maximus and testify to the dreadful crime the empress asked you to perform. Damaris will—"

"Never!" Leander screamed, trying to rise from his chair. "She mustn't see me like this. I won't go. I'll slit my wrists first."

"Would you rather see her die?" Senator Cato asked caustically.

"I don't care what happens. I won't let her see me."

He hadn't changed inwardly, Serena thought, though she did him the justice of understanding his reaction.

There was no more to be gotten from Leander Pella, and Serena pleaded after a few minutes, "It seems cruel to keep torturing him in our own way. Can't we let him go for the moment?"

"But we need him." All the same, the senator yielded and the weeping, hysterical Leander Pella was carried back to rest in the sunny inner garden. Seeing him there in the distance, Serena was reminded of Damaris pacing nervously through another garden, down in the old Forum. The thought increased her own tension and foreboding.

Nor did the ominous feeling decrease during the days in which they prepared for Damaris' trial. Young Clea had to remind her, "It is Damaris who is on trial, my lady. Not you."

On the rainy, muggy evening before the trial, Damaris became strangely calm, and scolded Serena, apparently as a result of Clea's comments. "You look so thin and white! But you mustn't. Just remember. I am prepared for anything, dear Serena. Since Lady Maxima told me about Leander, I know it was my fault that he suffered. He is so heroic. He is the answer to every dream I ever had, and now my poor darling has gone through such agony!"

"How can you blame yourself? Others are to blame. Others in high places, and . . ." She didn't say "Leander himself," knowing it would only disturb the girl. But though she sympathized with the unfortunate young physician, Serena was well aware that Leander Pella's ambition, his willingness to be used by the empress, had brought him to his present misery.

Damaris looked down at her own clasped hands. In a low voice, far too mature for a girl her age, she murmured, "It didn't last long enough, but all those times I went to visit Leander, and to work with him on sick people, they were divine hours. I knew, even when I was living those hours, that they would have to be paid for. Leander has paid for them. I haven't—yet. Claudia Acté saw us once in the Subura when Leander was working on a sick woman. Acté has a funny kind of religion, and she said we must do good, not evil to others. We must think of others, not ourselves. And Leander and I did all the evil things—except that our love wasn't evil. Only my oath to Vesta."

"Damaris!"

"Well," the girl muttered defiantly, "Acté's religion says people like us should have married if we loved. That would have made us good, not the breakers of oaths. So I'll be made to pay. The gods always make us pay."

"Does Acté say that?"

"No." She laughed with a touch of wistfulness. "But then, Acté isn't like the rest of us."

A prickling sense of depression washed over Serena. She hugged the girl to her, saying with a harsh insistence, "It isn't true. You owe the fates nothing. You will be freed." There were times when Serena forgot the things Damaris had done at the brothel, and remembered only the impulse of desperation that drove the impetuous girl to the acts.

*I am as guilty as she is.* The thought recurred constantly. . . . I too will be made to pay if—no, *when* I am found out. . . .

Serena and Damaris were sitting in Damaris' room like prisoners with a guard outside the door and the window, but they felt the closeness of their Vestal Order, perhaps the first time in Damaris' life, and then Lady Clea came to deliver a curious little sealed bit of papyrus to Serena. With it she brought the unpleasant news that a messenger from the Palatine was talking about Serena to Lady Maxima.

Serena ripped the seal of a weatherbeaten bit of papyrus that had stains of food, earth, and other, less identifiable objects. It had obviously come a long way. It was rolled so tight she could hardly hold it properly to read it: "From the friend whose life you once saved and whom you met in the Subura one night, to the noble Lady Serena. Greetings. If you are well, et cetera. I left Italy by the port of Antium with the help of a galley captain once in my family's service. He trades between my new business in Provincia, the Mediterranean coast of Gaul, and Greece, carrying wheat from Gaul to Rome, and wine, olives, and works of art from Greece to my social-climbing new friends in Gaul. He told me that Caesar and my old enemy, the prefect of police, are in Greece. I believe you expected them to help you and the girl with dark hair. I owe you much, so I have asked him on his return to Greece to find the prefect and convey a sense of your danger. I wish it might have been sooner. I pray to Mercury the Swift-Footed that the prefect, and perhaps Caesar himself, will reach you in time. All the gods go with you, gentle lady."

Damaris raised her head. In her brown eyes appeared the first warm rays of hope. "Will there be time for your friend the prefect to arrive?"

A great deal depended upon when Lycon had sent the message, and whether the winds had been favorable at this season, when few ships ventured into the Mediterranean. Then, there was the possibility of the message being intercepted by someone around Tigellinus who was employed by the empress. And always, the strong probability that Damaris' trial would be held sooner than they hoped. Anything could happen. But she said aloud, "You see, it is another hope. We will pray very hard tonight. The gods can't refuse us."

They heard Lady Maxima outside the door, impatiently asking the guard to step aside. When she came in, Serena saw that she did not bring good news. She was unusually nervous. "Serena, do you trust the Empress Octavia?"

It was the last thing Serena had expected. "I don't know. If she is away from Agrippina's influence, perhaps. I almost won her over in Baiae."

"In spite of this miserable weather, she needs you in Prince Britannicus' quarters on the Palatine. It seems that he doesn't trust any of the court physicians except Xenophen."

Serena arose. "Where is Xenophen?"

"The slave says he has gone off to Greece at Nero's request. It seems that Nero has had a sore throat, off and on, for weeks, and had to cancel two contest appearances. He was frantic. Claimed that the Lady Poppaea Sabina had expected him to win both contests. Who, may I ask, is Poppaea Sabina?"

"Claudia Acté's successor. For the worse, I'm afraid."

"And he makes decisions based on what a mistress believes, or doesn't believe?" Lady Maxima asked incredulously. "You are talking about the best emperor we ever had!"

"Even good men seem to change when they have complete power, my lady. We can't expect to produce an Augustus Caesar every generation." Seeing the disconsolate mood Damaris and Maxima had fallen into, she added, "But Nero is good-hearted and intensely loyal to his friends. With so many messages on their way to him, Agrippina can't be argus-eyed. One message, at least, will reach him and Tigellinus."

"But will he return? He seems very set on winning these music contests."

"Tigellinus will come!" Serena said firmly, and went out to question the Empress Octavia's maid.

Everything appeared authentic. She recognized the woman as having held Octavia's clothing the day the young empress swam with her. When Hagar came to argue that she must be taken along, Serena agreed. The two women, heavily mantled against the downpour of rain, went up with the empress's maid and two Palatine guards, to Prince Britannicus' hot, overfurnished apartments in his father's old sector of the palace.

Empress Octavia greeted Serena with a frantic hope. "Can you help him? We had just finished dinner when he had one of his spells and fell to the floor. He often has the falling sickness, but this time he cut his forehead rather badly."

"Where is the Empress Agrippina?" Serena asked at once. She would not again be lulled into security by that dangerous woman.

Octavia said the older woman had left the Palatine shortly after dinner. "Across the Tiber, I think. Someone mentioned a visit to the empress's old friend Pallas, who handled the imperial bookkeeping until he was ordered out recently by the emperor."

Serena recalled very well the haughty freedman who had, as Nero said, "sworn himself out of office." It looked as if, for once, Agrippina had not meddled in the invitation that brought Serena to the Palatine. Worried as she was, with Damaris' trial due to begin in a few hours, she returned to the business at hand and ordered the anxious Octavia, "Bring me cold cloths. Is there any ice in the palace?"

"At this season it is brought down from the hills every day. I'll send at once." She clapped her hands and gave the order to one of her maids, a middle-aged woman with pleasant, tired eyes and a Near Eastern headdress that concealed her hair. The woman left on a run.

Meanwhile, Serena set Hagar to wait outside the private quarters of the young prince. "And let me know instantly if the Empress Agrippina returns."

Hagar was grim. "You may depend on it, my lady."

Octavia looked startled as she and Serena went to Britannicus' inner apartment. "Why is that, Lady Serena?"

Serena could hardly tell her the truth. She would be sure to relay it to Agrippina. "Because people who are never sick themselves don't appreciate the gravity of a situation."

"Very true. And the empress often guesses wrong. She thought you were my husband's mistress. And all the time it seems to have been another blond, named Poppaea."

"Just so, your Majesty. Now, where is his Highness?"

Octavia brought Serena to her brother's couch in a room that had every wall hung with velvet, and the air was so close that Serena felt smothered. The young man's eyes looked strained and his flesh pallid, almost yellow, around the blood-stained towel that lay across his narrow forehead.

Octavia explained with a pitiful hope, "He was feeling much better after dinner, after he drank a large goblet of hot wine. But it was quite safe. We all drank from the amphora. Then, when he started to get up, he fell. It was the mosaics in the floor. Several were cracked, and that was how he cut his head. It isn't dangerous, is it? Only a little cut."

Serena understood her fears very well. She tried to reassure the young empress. "The falling sickness is not uncommon. His ancestor Julius Caesar had it. And many other great men."

With a gentle, firm action she removed the towel. The gold of its embroidery was rough on the bruise, which had now turned purple. She said, "Have them bring a plain piece of cloth. Not all this gold crust." She washed the wound gently, with warm water. There were those who believed illness was caused by an excess of blood accumulating in one pocket of the body, but it was obvious to her as she studied his pallid face with its cold dampness that quite the opposite was the problem here. She began by applying a salve to his forehead before rebandaging it. When she had given him a little mandragora juice to swallow, she followed this with a demand for a good dose of barley water to soothe his stomach.

Anxious to return to the Vestals' House, where she might be needed, she waited in no very good humor for the arrival of the barley water. Meanwhile, she set one of the prince's attendants, a young musician, to playing his lyre, in the hope that the plaintive music, evocative of far-off scenes, would calm Britannicus. The music served its purpose, for the boy roused himself to thank her, taking her hand and repeating, "I told Octavia we could trust you."

When the barley water was brought by the unobtrusive middle-aged woman with the Near Eastern headdress, Britannicus was about to take the goblet from Serena's hands, but his sister interfered.

"The taster first."

The sensitive youth with the lyre set his instrument down and drank from the goblet before offering it to Britannicus with a deep oriental salaam. Britannicus drank and stopped to complain, "Next time, don't have onions for dinner. I can taste them on the metal, Cimon."

The young musician bowed his regrets, while Octavia, Serena, and the maid who had brought the barley water exchanged amused looks. Again the maid's eyes seemed familiar. Not surprising. She had probably been in attendance on the Empress Octavia in Baiae.

Satisfied that her patient had relaxed and would sleep for several hours, Serena left the Palatine with Hagar, followed by the young empress's fervent thanks and even the prince's sweet, tired smile. Serena felt a keen sense of dread as she entered the Vestals' House again. She had decided to sit up with Damaris all night, to soothe the girl's natural fears, but Lady Maxima had taken the task before her and ordered Serena to bed.

Curiously enough, when they all awoke to a glorious, sunny dawn and set about preparing to receive the pontifex maximus, the Empress Agrippina, and many of the Senate in the atrium of the Vestals' House, the women assured each other honestly that they were glad the moment had come to judge the matter. There would be no more of the terrible suspense and delay. By sunset all would be settled.

"By this time tomorrow," Damaris exclaimed with hysterical gaiety, "we will all laugh at our fears. . . ." She looked at her reflection in the long silver mirror. She was an exquisite sight, like a budding rose from far-off Parthia, not very tall but slim enough, her body just curving into womanhood, an irresistible temptation to a lascivious male, in her pure and virginal white, her gown properly corded around her breasts, and her hair piled on her head like a shadowy diadem, woven into its sacred plaits. The diaphanous veil was dropped over her head so that it clung to her head, shoulders, and body in intricate folds.

Lady Maxima and Serena were similarly dressed, but their appearance was of no interest today. All excitement centered upon Damaris, the vestal who had sinned (so the whispers went) as few other virgins had sinned in the history of Rome.

Senator Cato arrived late, only just getting to his place beside Damaris as the lictors arrived in the vestal halls and

announced the approach of Tullius Servius Lucas, pontifex maximus of Rome, an ancient senator clad in a snowy clean toga which did much to disguise his long, frail, attenuated form and the palsied movements of his head and hands. His hair was white and freshly cut and curled. He looked like a fragile, untouchable god, and while he did not impress Serena, who knew he was benevolent and far less formidable than Agrippina, the sight of him scared Damaris so much that Lady Maxima had to squeeze her fingers in warning. He inclined his head to everyone graciously, indicating various acquaintances among the senators, and including Lady Maxima with a long, bony, extended finger and a smile.

Just as the investigation was about to begin, there were running steps in the passageway leading to the entrance hall. A Praetorian detailed to guard the Empress Julia Agrippina gave her Majesty's name to the doorkeeper, who blared it forth as Agrippina stepped into the big, crowded atrium looking as elegant, dignified, and imperious as the ring of vestal statues gazing out upon the proceedings. She wore the imperial purple, a deep reddish hue like wine, accentuated by bloodred rubies in necklace, earrings, and headdress.

Serena was comforted by a single fact and the memory it evoked. On her forefinger was the amethyst ring she had worn the night she gave Serena the poisoned feather which killed her husband. For all her grandeur, she was only a common murderer, after all.

But to prove this against her was another matter.

When the empress had taken a backless cerulean chair hurriedly provided by a vestal lictor, she bowed to the pontifex, asked his pardon for interrupting the proceedings, and then, as he examined the scroll of particulars in his shaking hands, Agrippina looked around the room. Among the four vestals seated behind the accused and Lady Maxima, her eyes examined each vestal face until she came to Serena, who looked back at her without expression, unseeing. It was the only defiance her circumstances permitted. Many occupants of the room saw the empress's shining red lips part in a smile. Her ruby-decked headdress glittered as she inclined her head ever so faintly in salutation. The room buzzed at the empress's clear expression of friendship. Serena was not fooled. So might the empress have smiled in answer to the gladiators' familiar hail: "Those who are about to die, salute you."

Across the wide room Serena felt the chill of the woman's jealousy and hatred.

The pontifex had ordered forth the witnesses to Damaris' presence in the brothel on the Subura. Lady Justitia and the Thracian woman testified, the former confused, unsure of anything, and constantly casting anxious looks at Lady Maxima, whose face had never been so forbidding. The owner of the brothel likewise testified that he had seen Damaris on several occasions but supposed she was brought in by the travelers who rented his upstairs rooms.

Senator Cato here called attention, in his florid, oratorical way, to the fact that Lady Damaris had a legitimate purpose in the building, and he reminded his rapt audience that this was fortunate, for it proved her innocent. No man, he pointed out, would be the better for it if a vestal had betrayed her vows. All men knew that if this had happened, the worst calamities would befall Rome. Eloquent descriptions of possible civic horrors rolled off his tongue, always reminding his audience—and above all, the responsive old pontifex—that Rome was infinitely the better if Lady Damaris, "this innocent child—only look at her, see her innocence!" was found not guilty. "Rome is, above all, famed for her dispensing of justice. Let us be very careful that we do not condemn this child—behold her!—on the grounds that she carried out the duty for which she had thrice been called by someone who perhaps wanted to lure her—and Rome—to destruction!"

"What is it precisely you mean by that?" the pontifex asked, leaning forward and cupping a hand to his ear.

With great caution Serena glanced at Agrippina. The empress looked interested, but no more. Yes. One more thing. The empress looked amused, a sleek cat who had cornered the mouse and could afford to play at letting it go.

What did that expression mean?

Senator Cato meanwhile wrapped his suspicions of the empress in careful, veiled phrases.

"Let us say that for reasons of ambition and jealousy, someone wished to destroy Rome. How better, your Excellency, than to trick a vestal to ruin and bring down upon Rome the curse of the gods?"

The pontifex, though aged, was not senile. "This is pretty farfetched, Senator."

"Noble Tullius Servius, there are signs here of just such a

plot. The august senior vestal will testify that she received a message from an unknown calling himself Thaddeus." Senator Cato knew, as Maxima and Serena knew, this was a lie, but Maxima would have sworn to more than this in order to save her "children." The senator went on, "We have an innocent vestal drawn to this despicable place to record a will for the man—still unknown—who called himself Thaddeus. The owner of the brothel will tell you that Thaddeus, a mysterious and unidentified traveler, disappeared on the night Lady Damaris was taken prisoner. Why did he run? What was he hiding?"

"Do you mean to tell us?" the pontifex asked with polite irony.

Not a bit of the wind had been taken out of Senator Cato's sails. He made a wide gesture. "Unquestionably, noble Tullius. This mysterious unknown who called himself Thaddeus was hiding the name of the person who bribed him to lure a vestal to her death. He fled Rome to escape the honest efforts of our questioners, who would have squeezed the truth out of him, and he dared not chance that. Others higher up might be involved."

This was hitting close to Agrippina, who, whatever her other crimes, was certainly not responsible for the imaginary summons of Damaris to the brothel. Serena saw her bite her lip in perplexity. The empress felt without understanding the danger. Then she raised her hand in a slight gesture noticed by Serena and by the empress's Praetorian guard stationed at the double doors to the entrance hall. He slipped out between partly opened doors.

Whatever the meaning of Agrippina's signal, Senator Cato's voice attracted Serena's attention again, and for several minutes she forgot the little byplay. The two butchers from the cattle forum were brought in, chained, disheveled, and filthy, to swear by every god that they had not despoiled the vestal virgin named Damaris.

Several events then occurred at the same time. The Empress Agrippina gave a tightly rolled message to her maid, who passed it on to the pontifex maximus. Meanwhile, there seemed to be disturbances in the Via Sacra, the street which ran past the Vestals' House and up a slight incline at the far end of the Forum. Other voices shouted news around the house itself, and the trial audience became restive, each person asking his neighbor what had happened.

The pontifex maximus was busy reading the message sent to him by the empress and ignored the commotion around him. He raised his eyes from the message and spoke to Senator Cato.

"Her Majesty suggests we may make an end of this inquiry very simply." He nodded to Agrippina. "If I may quote her Majesty: 'Any woman will tell you that this virgin may be proven innocent by the simplest of tests. A physical examination.'"

Serena felt as if an icy hand had been placed over her heart. Damaris was shaking silently in Lady Maxima's arms.

The pontifex threw the scroll aside. "This is very true, and I thank her Majesty for pointing it out. I had hoped to save our august vestals the shame of such an act, but the evidence is such that . . . In short, I believe we may prove Lady Damaris' innocence more quickly by this method. We may then see the Lady Damaris freed of all restraint and disgrace before sunset." He had risen and was about to adjourn the investigation when the sounds outside intruded upon the entrance hall and the Praetorian guard Serena had seen leaving quietly now came striding in. He ignored all the high-ranking people present, crossed the atrium, and saluted the Empress Agrippina.

"Yes, yes. What is it?" the empress demanded hoarsely.

"The Prince Britannicus is dead, Empress. The news was sent by the Empress Octavia. Food poisoning, it is said."

Everyone in the room rose to his feet, glanced at his neighbor, and then looked hurriedly away. Heads would roll for this. Unlike the death of the Emperor Claudius, where poison was only hinted at, the word had been publicly uttered before representatives of the most august body in the world, the Roman Senate.

*Who is back of the poisoning?* The whisper was everywhere, more often in their thoughts than on their tongues. Serena had grown so terrified at the prospect of Damaris being put through a physical examination that she could hardly take in the news of this latest calamity. She felt pity for the boy but horror for the implications. Then, only seconds later, she realized that his death followed closely on her visit the night before.

The empress had stood up. Apparently stupefied with shock, she whispered quite audibly to those nearest, who rapidly spread the story, "But my son has everything now. Why

should he send hirelings to commit such a . . . I'm sorry. Grief made me babble foolishly." She touched her forehead and hair tiredly. It seemed to Serena that all the rubies glowed like fresh drops of blood around the woman's head.

No matter. Even the death of a prince was not important beside the horror of the examination proposed for Damaris, an examination by patrician women beyond reach of bribes, who would discover she had committed the worst of crimes. She was no longer a virgin. Serena tried to get to Damaris, who was huddled against the senior vestal.

The empress left the atrium slowly and sedately, comforted by her ladies and several senators. As she reached the doors, she nodded to two *vigili* of the city police, who made their way through the buzzing, excited crowd. They came directly to the vestals.

"Lady Damaris?"

Lady Maxima's arm tightened around the girl, who was stupefied with fear. The senior vestal demanded, "What is this? Do you dare to touch a sacred vestal?"

Uneasily, one of the police looked over his shoulder at the pontifex maximus and Senator Cato. The latter was gesticulating as he objected, but the pontifex shook his head sadly and made a brief gesture which the *vigili* took for an order. More roughly now, they separated Damaris from Maxima and Serena. The latter had forgotten caution. She insisted as she tore at their hands, "This is an imperial trick. Ask the empress. Ask her why she has tried to trap the order?"

The effort failed. The police began to drag the girl away, toward Agrippina in the doorway. The empress spoke directly over everyone's head, to Serena. "Noble lady, we have more important matters than wanton vestals. I must comfort the Empress Octavia over the sad loss of my poor stepson."

Those within hearing exchanged glances, and then, seeing the strange intensity of the relationship between the empress and Serena, they began to speculate among themselves.

The *vigili* passed Serena with Damaris between them. Serena reached out in a blind effort to stop them. It was Lady Maxima who held her back. The older woman's face looked haggard and aged, as white as her gown. "It is useless."

In another moment the cowering girl and her captors had gone. The Empress Agrippina, very publicly mourning the death of her stepson, followed the police, her maids busy consoling her in her ostentatious grief.

The news reached the House of the Vestals in the afternoon, just as Lady Justitia, complaining about a new February storm, went across to her temple duties. Cowering slightly, she found it impossible to face the ladies who brought the appalling decision as to Damaris' fate. She passed them and scurried into the little round Temple of Vesta without looking back.

The widow of the murdered Senator Lentulus, Lady Aemilia, was the spokeswoman, with the news that Damaris had not been a virgin and had admitted as much when confronted with her examiners' opinion. The other patrician ladies remained in a close group, one of them tight-lipped with disapproval, but her companions, like Lady Aemilia, revealed in their manner the shock and horror of what they had been forced to disclose, as well as their genuine revulsion at the crime itself. Lady Maxima bore their sympathy with her usual dignity as Lentulus' widow embraced her and nodded gently to Serena when the younger woman came into the tablinum.

"My dear Maxima, it is a tragedy for all of us. For Rome itself."

"Frightful omen!" one of the other matrons exclaimed. "We are all accursed. Already that poor young Prince Britannicus is dead. Poisoned, they say. One of his sister Octavia's maids has been saying they will make an arrest soon. The funeral is tomorrow, in the afternoon. The morning, of course, will be devoted to the . . . other matter."

Maxima and Lady Aemilia ignored this. The vestal said sternly, "They won't carry out the sentence against that child. I swear they will not bury her alive!"

The other matrons exchanged uneasy looks, then pretended they hadn't heard this dangerous talk. Lady Aemilia assured Maxima, "I understand. I really do. You must think of it as

if she had died in a road accident, as my Lentulus did. Or as if she suffered from one of those Campanian fevers."

A matron murmured, "Buried alive! Does anyone know how long it takes to . . . that is . . ." Lady Aemilia cleared her throat loudly, and the matron's voice trailed off.

The senior vestal stood straighter. She said in her normal firm tones, "Never! Not that child."

Lady Aemilia repeated with deep sympathy, "I understand, dear friend. Ladies, we must go now. We have done our painful duty. We have not had a case like this within the memory of anyone now living." She shook her head. Whatever her sympathies, the crime was too great for her comprehension. "A vestal, the proudest order in the empire! To allow herself to be degraded, despoiled—I shall never understand it."

One of the matrons whispered to her. She caught herself and turned back to Lady Maxima and Serena.

"I'm sorry. I was asked to deliver a message. Lady Damaris has been given permission to be with a sister vestal tonight. The guards are waiting outside to escort her."

Lady Maxima stepped forward eagerly. "I'll go at once. But first, I must get a few things. That is . . . my cloak."

"Forgive me, Maxima. The guards inform me it is Lady Serena she asked for."

The senior vestal scarcely heard this. "Serena, send for my maid. And my . . . No. I'll get a wrap and a few things."

"The Lady Serena," one of the matrons repeated. "Only one visitor, they say. They were definite about that. Only Serena."

The deep hurt of her rejection still did not explain the suddenness of the senior vestal's panic. Feeling helpless and desperate, Serena put a hand on her arm.

"Shall I go, my lady, and give her your love?" She found it hard to go on, and heard a high-pitched voice that she scarcely recognized as her own, plead, "Maybe there is something we can do. Some comfort. We can't let her die like this, so young. . . ."

But Lady Maxima had gotten hold of herself and said firmly, "She asked for you, and you must go. As for me, I have something to discuss with the pontifex. I'll go to his mansion tonight while you are with Damaris." She studied Serena. The room was silent enough for everyone to hear the rain beating on the plants in the garden beyond. Then she

shook Serena slightly. "No tears. It will only make it worse for her. You must tell her we have never ceased to love her. Tell . . . But you will know what to say."

Serena hurriedly dressed in her storm cloak and heavy-soled sandals, while Hagar, who found Serena's weeping contagious, kept insisting, "I must go along. You cannot go alone."

But when Serena had embraced Lady Maxima and left the Vestals' House, the two *vigili* waiting for her refused to let Hagar accompany her. "Off with you, woman," the officer in charge ordered her. "Only authorized persons permitted on this trip, eh, Titus?"

Less amused, the other officer merely nodded, and they set off with Serena, her vision blurred by her tears, striding between them.

They were in the midst of heavy late-day traffic, having passed the Aemilian Basilica on their right, with the Julian Law Courts cutting off some of the windy rain on their left, when Serena looked around. This rain-washed area of the old Forum led to the Capitoline Hill and two great temples, that of Jupiter Highest and Greatest, and that of Juno Moneta. Between them, on their flanks, were the Roman mint and numerous temporary structures, none of which seemed appropriate to hold one of the sacred vestals, even a fallen one. The only prison in this area, the dungeon called the Tullianum, had several modern cells nearby, built above the ground and squeezed between the ancient dungeon and the headquarters of the *vigili* and other civil guards. The dungeon itself was more of a monument to the barbaric past than a practical place of present-day incarceration.

Serena stopped, bewildered. She shook her head, blinking away tears and rain together.

"Come along!" one of the police ordered her, his hand closing heavily around her elbow.

Suspicion grew, and she pulled back.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To the condemned female."

"Not the Tullianum dungeon!"

Serena knew only what all of Rome knew about the Tullianum, whose gloomy face she often passed on her way to the temples on the sacred Capitoline Hill. The most ancient of prisons, built straight down into rock and earth through which moisture perpetually seeped, it was said to have a

prison cell directly below the main dungeon itself, so deep in the ground that it had no doors or windows. It was seldom used nowadays, since the empire had come into being. The Senate frequently inveighed against its existence, but it still served as the ultimate threat against criminals accused of heinous crimes.

It seemed especially horrible that young Damaris must spend the last night of her life in such a grave. Almost as if it were a preparation for that other, the ultimate death in life which must come the next day. Serena shuddered.

The police hadn't stopped when she stopped. They simply kept to their long stride, scowling at the rain and urging her along. They passed the *rostra* decorated with ships' prows, and she remembered that happy, triumphant morning when young Nero was proclaimed the new Caesar. And beside him she seemed to see Tigellinus' tall, armored figure shining in the sunlight of that day which seemed long ago.

Above and behind the constant rebuilding, the scaffolding and temporary shelters for the enormous paper stores of the Archives Building, Serena caught a glimpse of the Gemonian Stairs, where, historically, state criminals were torn to pieces and the remains tossed down these steps. The last famous—or infamous—victim had been Sejanus, prefect of Rome under Tiberius, some twenty years before.

As the two police neared the squat, stony form of the Tullianum with Serena, the storm increased in fury, blinding her. She ducked her head and was so busy feeling her way into the interior of the huge chamber, roughly guided by her escort, that she had no time to sense the universal dread of the place until she wiped away the rain that had pelted her face and saw that she was in the upper, or detention, cell, facing a stern, hard-featured officer, probably of the lower patrician class, the Esquiline Order. He sat in a backless chair, with one muscular leg stretched out and a scroll open before him on his portable army desk. There was no sign of Damaris.

Anxiously she looked around. Her two-man escort had retreated to the iron-bound street door, where they stood guard, apparently against an attempt at escape by the prisoner. Beside the officer in charge was a hole in the rough stone floor, a hole through which a man might be dropped from this level. From this stone-reinforced hole came the moldy stench of stagnant water seepage through earthen walls.

"Name?" the officer demanded. His voice was more ex-

pressionless than harsh. A city official doing his duty, which bored him.

She drew herself up, remembering all the dignity of her office, remembering Lady Maxima. "I am the Lady Serena, one of the six vestals of Rome. I have been permitted to visit the Lady Damaris."

"The vestal Serena," the officer repeated, studying the scroll again. "That is correct. You share the last hours of the condemned. Atu will take you below."

Neither of the *vigili* on guard at the door made a move. Then, as if emerging from the terrible regions of Black Tartarus itself, she saw huge hands reach up out of the hole in the stone floor, close around the stone that framed the hole, and a hulking creature wearing only a breechclout and excessive tufts of body hair lifted himself out of the dungeon below. He was grinning, and made peculiar grunting sounds in answer to the prison governor's commands. Apparently he had no tongue.

In witless horror Serena had backed away until she was pressed hard against the wall. She could not take her eyes off the hideous creature who reached for her, his hands groping ever closer as she retreated along the wall.

"Please . . . don't touch me . . . don't touch me . . ." she heard herself crying wildly, but then, as the huge hands fastened around her body under her breasts, she recovered a little courage and refused to demean herself further. She managed to shout, "The emperor will have you all crucified for this sacrilege. You may not touch me!"

The governor gestured impatiently. "You wish to be with the prisoner? It is the only way. Tradition won't let us provide a decent set of steps."

The hulking creature from the lower depths swung Serena over the dark hole in the center of the floor. Her indignant protest was muffled against the heavy male odor of the slave's belly. She saw that he intended to drop her down through the floor, and tried to scream.

The governor said with a mixture of boredom and disgust, "Gently, Atu! No need to break the noble lady's legs. Drop her gently."

It was not very comforting advice, and she braced herself for a fall into the pit below, but when he dropped her down through the hole, holding her under the armpits, she found in spite of her agonized scream that the fall did no more than

stun her and send prickles of pain through her legs as her sandals struck earth-covered stone.

There seemed to be no curiosity about her in the room overhead. No one looked down to see what had happened to her. She could hear the governor's voice dismissing the *vigili*. After that, there was silence. The hole itself provided the only illumination for the dungeon, and it took Serena's eyes a minute or two before they adjusted to the darkness around her.

It was during this time that she became aware of something that moved in the dark beyond her vision. In a voice that quavered despite her efforts to make it firm, she asked, "Where are you?"

"Serena! Is it you? I couldn't believe it. I thought I was dreaming. They said I would be refused when I asked to see you."

Damaris got to her feet and made her way to the center of the dungeon, where she sank down on her knees and touched Serena in a gingerly way. "Did they hurt you?"

"No. I have special permission to be with you. Are you all right?"

"The mute would like to have had me. But I threatened to scream. He is afraid of the prison governor."

Serena stared hard, and gradually made out Damaris' features. She caressed the girl's tousled hair. She kept repeating, "Are you all right? Really?"

Damaris put her arms out. They were very cold when Serena embraced her. The girl wore only the dark slave's gown someone had given her, so that nothing of the sacred vestal sisterhood would go with her to her ignominious prison. She seemed very calm. Resigned, and yet with a kind of inner strength that surprised and relieved Serena, who murmured, "Maybe Senator Cato can do something. Or maybe Tigellinus received one of my messages. We mustn't give up."

It was Damaris who had the courage to face the truth about her fate. "Dearest Serena, what can they do to save me? I was guilty. And if I lived a thousand lives, I'd do it all over again."

"Here. Take my cloak. It's still wet, but your arms are so cold."

Damaris took the cloak, threw it around Serena and herself, and they huddled together in their shared misery. After a long silence Damaris said in an incredulous voice, "Did you

know that once in Republican times a king who was a prisoner in this dungeon ate the straw he slept on before he died of starvation? And ever so many others were strangled. There is a stake over there. You can't make it out until you've been here a little longer. They chain people to it. . . . And in the Forum I looked up here a thousand times in the old days and never once really looked at this place."

Still attempting to raise her spirits, Serena said, "There really are people in high places who might save you if they get here in time."

Damaris astonished her by saying, "Claudia Acté was here an hour ago. They let her speak to me."

"Claudia Acté is in Rome?"

"The emperor didn't take her to Greece. General Otho's wife, Poppaea, went with Nero. They say he's terribly in love with her." Damaris laughed, a small, light laugh. "She is a blond, of course. Dyed blond! But poor Acté! She has finally been asked to join Nero—and his new mistress—in Corinth. It seems that the Lady Poppaea needs someone to cover the relationship with Nero, so her husband won't learn the truth. Naturally, that dear, foolish Acté left this afternoon. She will tell your friend Tigellinus about me. It will be too late, but she means to try . . . Acté is strange. I was quite mad—screaming and frightened, so terribly frightened. But she talked to me. Things I can't even explain to you. You would never understand. You love that silly goddess Vesta too much."

Serena stiffened with resentment at the attack on her beloved "Mother Goddess," but then agreed, "Acté has taken up some eastern religion similar to the One God of the Jews, I believe."

"Her god preaches an eternal life."

Serena thought: Eternal? It was hard enough to get through one life. . . . The she conquered her typical Roman cynicism for Darmaris' sake.

The girl went on dreamily, "I truly believe that when I have paid for my sins, I will meet Leander in heaven."

"In what?"

"In heaven. Oh, Serena! You can't imagine how that comforts me."

Serena said gently, "I am glad. Wherever this heaven is, it must be a good place. Acté is one of the very kindest people

I have ever known. . . . I wonder why she came to the Tulianum. She must have found out you had been taken here."

"No. She visits prisons. She helps prisoners. It's so odd. I don't understand her, but I believe her, all the same."

"I'm glad." Ever practical, even in this extremity, Serena added on a new note of encouragement, "Maybe she will reach Tigellinus in time to save you."

"Dearest Serena! I am to die in a few hours. As long as I gave myself only to Leander, I was innocent in my heart. But those other times. The brothel. I must pay for that."

They said nothing for an endless time, each busy with her own painful thoughts. In the room above them, lamp boats of oil were lighted, casting a faint light through the opening directly down into the dungeon. Damaris moved and studied Serena's face.

"You must get up and walk about. Otherwise, your legs will be cramped and you can't move."

Serena smiled faintly, looked around. It was still impossible to see the corners of the cell. Damaris pointed out a pallet of straw which was a vague, lighter mass in a far corner. Serena thought at once of the starving king who had eaten straw. She got up, following Damaris' advice, and then began to talk rapidly, anything to keep their minds off the coming dawn.

The dampness seemed to penetrate even her sandals, and several hours after her arrival, Serena was still sickened by the fetid odor of the cell. But as the hours dragged past, the two young women found it impossible to raise their thoughts above their surroundings. The night watch changing in the prison governor's quarters, the oppressive atmosphere with moisture creeping in between each stone, and between layers of earth, gradually silenced them. Toward morning Serena heard Damaris weeping softly. They had come together again for warmth and comfort, and Serena whispered tenderly, "Think of Acté's words, dearest. The glory of the heaven she described."

"It isn't that, Serena. I'm not afraid. I wish I might see Leander once more. The last time I saw him was when we quarreled, before your trip to Baiae."

Overhead, they heard a door clang, then scuffling sounds, heavy military boots coming to attention, soldiers loudly saluting the prison governor. Damaris shivered, stirred, and got to her feet.

"I must be able to stand up when they take me. I couldn't bear it if they had to drag me."

A kind of nightmarish half-sleep had left Serena confused. She arose from the straw they had sat on in the middle of the floor under the faint rim of light. As she did so, a rat scurried out of the straw and across Damaris' sandaled feet. She screamed.

Overhead, the prison governor looked down through the hole in the floor. Apparently satisfied that his prisoner remained in the doorless, windowless cell, he snapped his fingers. The hairy mute called Atu dropped down with a heavy "splat!" as his bare feet struck the floor. Damaris shrank from his touch, pressed back against Serena, who tried to comfort her. Atu pulled her away, lifted her high, until her sandals kicked at his bare chest.

In the room above, a soldier knelt and drew Damaris up. A minute later she was gone from Serena's sight, and Atu followed. It had all happened so quickly they weren't given time for their farewells. Serena felt a desolation beyond tears.

Above her, minutes later, she heard the governor call, "Now you will free Lady Serena," and the shadow of Atu's big body appeared over the floor opening.

*Will all of the horror of this night soon be repeated? And then will I go to my death with Damaris' quiet courage? . . .*

Her throat seemed frozen with her terror.

The mute dropped down, lifted her stiff, unyielding body to the floor above. The sudden daylight from the open doors made her cringe. The governor, watching Atu climb out of the hole, complained, "Why don't we use *scalae* to get them out? Army ladders would be a good deal more practical. But no. Tradition is everything."

One of the soldiers reached for the wine goblet on the table. He offered it to Serena, who took it with shaking hands. The soldier said, "Governor, the lady looks faint. Might as well give her the wine the condemned left. She may need it."

Everyone was shocked as the prison governor snatched the goblet out of Serena's hands.

"By Bacchus, not on your life! Not this wine!" Everyone stared at him. He recovered lamely, "This wine was sent over by the pontifex only for use of the condemned. All right. Put the Lady Serena into the litter and take her along."

"Where are you taking me?" Serena demanded wildly, looking around at every face.

The governor dumped the wine on the stone floor and waved the soldiers away with her, answering in his usual blunt way, "To meet your senior vestal and the others at the gravesite, of course. The law says you must witness the execution."

In dim, legendary days before the inception of the Roman republic, religious burials were permitted within the walls of the city. Serena had heard tales of a small burial plot under the Via Sacra itself, but within recorded history all burials of cremated remains took place along the great arterial highways north and south of Rome.

Serena shared the Roman feeling that the dead, being buried so close to the busy highways of the empire, gained a small measure of immortality. They were not hustled into some necropolis fenced off in a forgotten piece of ground. This day was made more ghastly for her by knowledge that Damaris would not die and be cremated in the customary way of all Romans. There would be no religious cremation. Instead, her flesh would corrupt in the earth, like that of an irreligious barbarian.

As mine may corrupt, she thought, well aware that she too had betrayed her vows to holy mother Vesta. Yet, as she was lifted into a curtained litter for the trip to the place of execution, she kept remembering the tenderness and compassion of the great hearth goddess. Vesta would understand and forgive human frailties.

"Watch over Damaris, dear mother Vesta. Don't let her suffer," she prayed silently, and kept her mind fixed on this prayer as the litter shafts were taken up and the journey began. She thought very briefly of Claudia Acté's words to the girl, and their strange comfort. But Acté's religion was incomprehensible.

The subject of Acté made Serena turn to what she herself recognized as the most despicable selfishness: could Acté reach Tigellinus in time to help Serena, since the rescue of Damaris was now beyond hope? But what could Philip do?

The memory of her last minutes with Damaris intruded, and by the time the litter stopped outside the Colline Gate-

way on a rolling slope dotted with a carpet of the first, unexpected Egyptian irises and Italian field flowers, Serena could think of nothing but Damaris' anguish at dying amid the beauty of such a morning. Yesterday's rain had left the countryside glistening and wet. The smell of earth and the blue patches of sky between storm clouds overhead made the idea of her death, and at such an age—hardly over childhood—even more terrible.

Serena was lifted out of the litter to stand before a yawning hole in the earth, freshly dug. Clenching her teeth and resolved not to faint, she avoided it and looked around. Fanning out to the main north-south highway on the near horizon was the greatest crowd she had seen since the proclamation of Nero as the new Caesar. All these breathless, yet chattering citizens in their soiled togas, slaves in a myriad bright tunics, and foreigners and visitors to Rome, had gathered to see one disgraced vestal virgin put to death. There had not been such a show since the death of the Prefect Sejanus and his twelve-year-old daughter, despoiled by the executioner before her murder, because, according to Roman law, no virgin could be put to death.

Serena's glance wavered, returned to the grave at her feet. Deep and rectangular, a kind of miniature room, it had been dug in the moist ground with the walls shored up by stones. Inside was a straw pallet beside which were placed a small amphora of water and a round loaf of bread. A flat wooden roof to be eventually covered with earth was nearby, propped against the hillside.

The whole city would lie under the curse of the gods if a vestal's life was taken by her executioners. She would therefore be sealed in her tomb and left to the pity of the gods, no longer the concern of Rome itself. The ceremony of casting her out of life had already begun when Serena arrived, and she was soon joined along the length of the grave by Lady Maxima and her remaining three vestals. They looked fragile as reeds, their pure white garments making the vestals visible to all present.

The cold, civic propriety of the scene was such that Serena could not weep for the slender young Damaris, now dressed once more in virginal white with the sacred ribbons fluttering in the morning breeze. Her thick, shining dark hair had been carefully plaited to form a crown, with the white veil arranged over the hair, its folds falling below her waist. If she had

worn the crimson veil of a bride, she might have appeared to be going to her bridal couch.

She moved between guards, led by the tall, gaunt figure of the pontifex. The high priest turned his head and looked directly at Lady Maxima as he passed. Serena wondered. It seemed to be a signal. Damaris moved like a sleepwalker, quite unlike herself, as if she were under a spell, and this fact, with her sweet, set smile, made Serena recall the wine the prison governor had given to Damaris, and only Damaris. She prayed that it had contained some kind of drug which would let Damaris die quickly in sleep. Serena had been so intent upon this prayer that the horror of what was happening below scarcely touched her.

Among the vestals Lady Justitia was wailing and Lady Maxima gave her a hard, painful nudge. The senior vestal, like Serena, had gone beyond tears and sniveling sorrow. She looked like a woman carved in stone.

The pontifex seemed to be prolonging the horrible scene, waiting for something. Finally he uttered words excluding the condemned from all intercourse with the living, and the buzzing, murmuring crowd became silent. The pontifex spoke words to Damaris who automatically repeated the plea to the gods for forgiveness. She appeared to be in a stupor. The guards reached out for her body, turning her over to the executioner, who must beat her with rods, as was required by sacred law, before depositing her in the tomb. At that minute she swayed and fell forward against the body of the pontifex. Very gently he held her, let her sink in his arms, and knelt beside her. He looked up, murmured to Lady Maxima in a low voice, "She is dead."

Serena whispered, "Thank you, merciful Goddess."

The poisoned wine given Damaris by the prison governor on orders of the pontifex had finally taken effect. The throng breathed a sigh in unison. Their feelings had been ambivalent. They wanted to see a sinner die, but what they had seen was an exquisite girl of fifteen being led to the most terrible of all fates, and this "act of the gods" in sparing her a part of that fate was welcomed by the mob.

But still the letter of the law must be carried out and the executioner, receiving a flexible bamboo stave from the pontifex, laid it hard across the back of the dead girl. The sound cut through the morning air. There was a hissing sound as

the crowd drew breath sharply. Two more blows, and it was ended.

When Damaris had been examined and pronounced dead by the hooded man representing Charon, the legendary figure who ferried souls across the River Styx, her body was laid gently upon the straw in the grave.

On the edge of the crowd there was a commotion. A young man had fainted. Still steeped in the emotion of seeing Damaris' body placed in its tomb, Serena looked around in a daze. The young man's collapse had caused a small commotion. No one laughed. Perhaps they were afraid of stout, toga-clad Senator Cato, who seemed to be the boy's guardian and now ordered his litter bearers to carry the young man away. In his fall the young man had lost the head covering that partially obscured his face. He was Leander Pella.

The sight of his fresh scars shocked those around him as he was taken away, and this mitigated their Roman contempt for weakness.

Serena understood his weakness quiet well. She was still standing between Lady Maxima and a guard, holding tight to all the vestiges of her own strength, when the senior vestal tapped her shoulder. Serena took another look at the scene below, saying her private good-bye to Damaris. The other vestals seemed to be held by the same emotion, but Lady Maxima, her wrinkled flesh looking carved in marble, motioned them to follow Serena. The latter glanced back, wondering if she would soon see this place again, from the viewpoint of the condemned. The hardest task of all would be to tell the Lady Maxima. This was the ultimate betrayal. The senior vestal thought of her as a daughter and soon, perhaps, Serena would bring new grief and disgrace upon her.

Lady Maxima gave orders, had the young vestals placed in litters, and after a long, unsmiling stare at Serena, ordered her into the remaining litter.

"And you, august lady?" Serena asked humbly. "What will you do?"

"There are prayers to be said over her grave." Lady Maxima turned away, then stopped, said over her shoulder, "You would wish it done for you, would you not, Serena?"

Serena couldn't speak. Nor did the senior vestal seem to expect anything of her but the heavy burden of her guilt, which Serena was certain she revealed in her pallid face. As Lady Maxima moved away, escorted by a guard in the elabo-

rate cuirass and helmet of the Praetorians, Serena heard her say an extraordinary thing: "The Lady Serena is not herself. I have seen it coming upon her. I had hoped it would not be noticed, but this shame of Lady Damaris has been too much for her. Something will have to be done."

Serena was about to be helped into the litter, but she waited, hardly understanding the Praetorian's equally extraordinary reply: "Senator Cato has been whispering it about also, august lady, She is mad, you think? . . . What is done in such a case?"

"I must consider. And of course, the permission of the pontifex is needed. Frankly, she must be removed from sight until she is herself again. Otherwise, her sorrow will be a contagion to the other vestals and most displeasing to the holy goddess."

But I am not mad, Serena insisted silently. Assuring herself again: How have I shown madness? What do they mean? And especially Lady Maxima. I thought she cared for me. Why does she tell such a monstrous lie about me?

"The litter, august lady," the vestals' chief lictor reminded her.

Still puzzled and hurt over the senior vestal's description of her very natural sorrow, she allowed herself to be borne back to the Vestals' House in the old Forum. Upon entering the serene and beautiful house, she glanced once at the heavily built-up slopes leading to the temples of Jupiter and of Juno Moneta. Between them, among other government buildings, was the roof of the ancient Tullianum. She closed her eyes for an instant, then went inside.

Hagar was waiting for her, looking anxious and fretful as always.

"You look terrible, my lady. You must eat. Then you need a bath and a massage and some clean clothes. And a long rest."

Confused by these rapid orders, Serena caught at the cold marble body of one of the statues in the atrium and held herself erect. "I am not hungry. Later, perhaps."

Her ragged nerves were shocked by the old slave's sudden, loud cry: "Here, here, my lady! You are mad to act so. The girl died as befits such a criminal. And now you pretend not to know me. Look at me. Old Hagar!" Under her breath, she urged Serena strangely, "You have lost your senses. Do you understand me? It is for your own safety."

"My safety?"

"Unless you wish to be buried alive!"

It was enough. Serena understood. Hagar and Lady Maxima had guessed, and taken the only way out that they could find, her two dear and devoted friends. To her horror, she began to weep, though such displays of emotion were usually foreign to her.

"That's it! Make a scene! You are doing well," Hagar congratulated her, all the while hurrying Serena to her small, severe cubicle of a room.

"Did you tell? Does Lady Maxima know I love him? Oh, Hagar!"

Beside her, the old woman kept whispering, "Scream. Remember, Lady Damaris' death drove your senses away."

Serena dropped onto the hard, armless chair and let her head be thrust down to prevent her fainting. She opened her eyes and absently followed the carved Greek scrollwork outlined in gold on the legs of the chair. Hagar's hard, callused palm kept pressing on the nape of her neck.

"Cry out, my lady!" the old slave whispered sharply.

Serena felt far too tired to go through this dramatic effort, but appreciating the sense of it, she cried loudly, "Let me out! We'll all be buried alive. Let me go!"

"That's it. Well done."

It was a hope, anyway.

Hagar went to get some of the flower juice the physician Xenophen used for putting his patients to sleep. Out of the corner of her eye Serena saw vestals and slaves peek in at her and then back away nervously, exchanging glances. Serena turned and looked at them. She had caught a glimpse of her face in the silver mirror, and its blue-white color and the dark smudges under her eyes combined to make a mask of tragedy. Small wonder the young vestals were afraid of her. She stared at them, vaguely asked Justitia, the tallest among them, "Who are you? Why do you look at me like that?"

It was enough to convince them. Clea said fiercely, "It's all Justitia's fault. If she and that accursed slave of hers hadn't been such tale bearers, we'd have Damaris alive and Lady Serena herself today."

There were murmurs from the others, none of whom wanted to defend Lady Justitia. They all made Serena nervous. She was relieved when Hagar returned and closed the portieres, shutting them out.

"Moan, now!"

Serena groaned from the heart. At this minute her greatest misery came with the knowledge that Lady Maxima knew of her shame and disgrace. The senior vestal now knew that she had broken her vows. She had caused that good, kind woman more pain, just when Lady Maxima needed support after suffering the tragedy of Damaris' death.

"How does Lady Maxima know I love him?" she asked in a low, broken voice, unlike herself.

"I had to tell her. She couldn't understand why the empress hates you so. She was going to challenge her."

"Gods! If the empress knows for a certainty—"

"My lady, she can't use your love against you."

Astonished, Serena asked, "Why not? I'd think she could hardly wait to use it against me."

Hagar glanced nervously at the portieres, but their voices had been too low to be overheard. "Then *he* would be punished. Your prefect. Scourged to death, like Lady Damaris' two brothel lovers yesterday."

"No!"

Hagar shook her. "Never mind that. To protect Philip Tiggelinus the empress has to prove you guilty of another crime, and Senator Cato thinks it's going to be the Prince Britannicus' death. That is why you were called in to help the prince two nights ago. Already, the senator says they are talking poison on the Palatine. Remember the old harridan's words yesterday when she heard of his death? Something about her son wanting Britannicus dead. Because the prince was on the side of his stepmother in this race for power. There's gossip now that you were chosen by Nero to kill the boy."

"Impossible! Nero has no interest in his stepbrother. He scarcely notices him."

"If Nero could be deposed, my lady, wouldn't Britannicus be the logical emperor? That's the seed of suspicion the old harridan's planting. That's also why we are pretending you are mad. If the charge comes, there'll have to be examinations. Delays. She can't have you executed just out of hand, in one day."

Serena pressed her hands to her head in turmoil. "What must we do?"

"You are mad, as we said. And a mad vestal must be removed from her sisters until the gods cure her. Any delay

will serve until Lady Maxima's messengers reach the emperor or the prefect."

"If they aren't stopped by Agrippina," Serena muttered bitterly. She saw the trap before her. She had administered a drink to Britannicus. It was the Emperor Claudius' death all over again.

Serena had only the vaguest idea of what to do. She finally yielded to Hagar's assurance that the senior vestal would handle everything.

That painful discussion with Lady Maxima took place in the senior vestal's private bedroom, with its heavy door and single window embrasure covered by heavy velvet curtains.

"I will not ask you how you broke your sacred vows," the older woman began. "You, whom I counted my second self, my successor."

"August lady, we love each other. Like any . . . husband and wife. That is how it is with us. Even to the fact that he wants a family. I know I can't be forgiven, but I thought you should hear the truth." Serena heard her own words but knew there was no possible explanation. She had sacrificed honor, future, loyalty, perhaps even life, for what the virgin Lady Maxima would call "a mere physical impulse." A union of bodies which was vile because it besmirched the noble goddess Vesta and her viceroy on earth, Lady Maxima.

The senior vestal said, "Hagar, go."

The old woman looked at each of them, nodded knowingly, and left, saying, "I'll be outside, on guard. Remember, august lady, we are guarding a crazy woman."

When they were alone and Serena saw the deeper lines burned in Maxima's face, the sad, disappointed look in those aging eyes, she thought her own heart would break. She felt the painful tears start, and covered her face with her hands. She tried to get out the words: "Except for what I did to you, I would be happy now. But what I did to you. . . ."

The iron control of the senior vestal broke at sight of Serena's anguish. She reached out, her hard, dry-boned fingers brushing Serena's hands.

"My dearest, there is something at stake here greater than your betrayal of me, or even of your vows. Your life is threatened. Do you think after poor young Damaris was murdered today, that I could lose my favorite daughter as well?"

Serena raised her head, made out the older woman's face through a blur of tears, wondering at the miracle that made

this woman of marble so much dearer to her than her own martyred mother. At this moment she cared more about Lady Maxima's forgiveness than her own life, and she threw her arms around the older woman as she would have embraced a beloved parent. She cried hoarsely, "Forgive me, please . . . please forgive me."

"Dear child, it is yourself you must work to forgive. You will recover from your madness in time, you understand. In time. Meanwhile, until you are free of your vows, we must preserve your life. Senator Cato and I thought the madness scheme would delay the empress. The Palatine gossip says *a vestal* may have poisoned the prince. Who else but you?"

A slight noise at the window startled them. The velvet curtain fluttered. Lady Justitia's fragile face appeared in the window embrasure. She was standing in the area between the Vestals' House and the round Temple of Vesta.

"Did someone call out? Lady Maxima, do you need help?"

Reacting rapidly, Serena began to push at Lady Maxima, crying in a voice eerily off-key, "You lie! You want to bury us all alive. A sacrifice to the goddess."

After muttering "that damnable spy!" Lady Maxima raised her voice, called to Lady Justitia, "I am quite capable of caring for a hysterical. I had her calm until you interfered." And to Serena she playacted, "There, there. You need not remain in Rome. You shall go where it is quiet and sunny and you are safe from burial alive."

Justitia sniffed, looked deeply hurt, and babbled, "I only meant to help. Everyone behaves so horridly to me . . . I felt quite faint on my way to duty at the temple. That's all." Her old slave, the Thracian woman, took her arm. Maxima and Serena heard that gravelly voice: "Dear little lady, don't faint. Come, we've only a few steps to the temple. . . ."

Maxima went to the window, remarked with satisfaction, "They've gone. Well, my dear, if that truly addled creature heard anything, we will know soon enough. In which case," she added grimly, "you and I may join poor Damaris. Meanwhile, we've no time to lose. We've a mad vestal who must be removed to a place where she cannot hurt her sisters. For that we need the permission of the pontifex, who will have to speak with you. . . . More acting, my dear." She considered, tapping a fingernail against her teeth. "He will give us no trouble. I wish I could be as sure of that loose-tongued Justitia."

There was terror in every step of what Hagar referred to as "our escape." They must get the permission of the pontifex maximus before they left the city, and he, along with the rest of Rome, would be attending the public funeral orations for Prince Britannicus. Serena appeared in the company of her sister vestals, behaving with a vagueness and borderline hysteria that was noticed with alarm or sympathy by her sisters, who could then testify as to her condition. She hated the hypocrisy of it, but reminded herself that her life depended on it. She was made more keenly aware of this by the Empress Agrippina's baleful eye upon her during the entire proceedings. She had a few minutes' peace afterward, when the information was given out by the imperial news release, *Acta Diurna*, that Agrippina would leave immediately for Brundisium to supervise the repairs being made on the imperial highway. Thus, she would let her "good works" erase from her heart the shock of her stepson's untimely death. The public was duly impressed.

"I've had a word with the pontifex," Lady Maxima told Serena after she had sent the other vestals ahead through the Forum with the rapidly dispersing funeral crowds. "He isn't the bravest man in the world, but I reminded him of the damage to the faith of the Roman masses if another vestal were to be tried."

Serena looked at her with admiration. Lady Maxima might be one of the heads of a great religion, but she was practical to the last degree.

"Surely he doesn't think I murdered that poor prince."

Lady Maxima brushed this aside. "Certainly not. But if left to his own devices, he would simply let the matter slide away, perhaps until Agrippina returns. Now he feels bound to consult with several senators—"

Alarmed, Serena cried, "But one of them is sure to get back to Agrippina!"

"Ah, you forget. The empress will be on her way to Brundisium. She probably thinks to lull us into a false security until she can concoct some kind of evidence against you. She set the matter in motion by the gossip that's circulating."

"The ships from Greece dock at Brundisium," Serena murmured. "Surely she doesn't intend to meet Nero yet. The longer she remains away from him, the longer she is in control of Italy." Could it be someone else she hoped to meet at Brundisium? Philip, for instance.

All this was irrelevant to the senior vestal. As they entered the Vestals' House she said briskly, "I told the pontifex the thing must be done today. We should have his consent to your removal before nightfall, I hope."

"Where am I to go?" Serena felt like a trignon ball being bounced from hand to hand, with no power of her own.

"If possible, to the one person who can help you."

"Philip."

Lady Maxima sighed. "No. Not that . . . not the prefect. The emperor. The prefect will no doubt persuade him. That's neither here nor there. Nero will save you. Especially as it would annoy his mother."

To Serena it seemed so simple. Nero would help her. Philip and Acté would be on her side. But how to avoid Agrippina's spies and reach the emperor far off in Greece? She voiced her fear.

Lady Maxima waved it aside. "It is dangerous. Even the pontifex suggested having you taken north, if necessary, since Agrippina will be in the opposite direction. But Senator Cato and I discussed the matter before Damaris . . . before her death. He mentioned that if things get too bad, our only hope is Nero."

"To get to Nero in Greece, I must take the Appian Way to Brundisium," Serena reminded her. "That would be walking into Agrippina's arms. Or her web."

They became aware of sounds in the garden beyond the atrium.

"Holy mother Vestal!" Lady Maxima exclaimed, strangely unnerved, on edge. "That sounds like a male voice. Come. We'll lock him away from all my poor squealing children. He must have news for us."

She drew her stately palla around her and moved ahead of

Serena, through the open folding doors on either side of the tablinum to the garden. Serena was infected by her nervousness and came after her on a run.

Hagar was alone in the garden, making frantic signs to Lady Maxima. "Someone to see Lady Serena," she hissed, adding, "and your august presence." She whispered, "Life and death!"

Somehow, Hagar had emptied the garden of the three remaining vestals with their servants, so Lady Maxima and Serena could be private with their male guest in Maxima's own quiet room. There they found Senator Cato looking oddly unlike himself without his dignified toga. In a dark, enveloping travel cape over a Greek chiton that somewhat disguised his rotund form, he might have been any heavyset foreigner in Rome on a trading mission or to see the sights of the metropolis. He threw back the hood of his cape. He was obviously on edge.

"Ladies, there is no time for the usual formalities. Lady Serena has a friend whose life she once saved. A man named Lycon who owns a trading bireme. His captain's wife, Niobe, was once a . . . friend of mine." He gave Lady Maxima a side glance.

She sniffed, said briskly, "Yes. We know about you senators and your friends. Continue."

A trifle disconcerted, he went on. "The point is, Niobe assures me that Lady Serena will trust Lycon. He sent Niobe to me. She and her husband, Captain Glaucus, are here loading cargo on the docks. They can sneak Lady Serena out of the city to Lycon's ship. Luckily, Niobe found me at my house, and at just the right time. I was in despair. According to those gossiping whores on the Palatine who serve Agrippina, the empress's Praetorians are already watching the roads north out of the city, hoping Lady Serena will try to escape. They will use her attempt to escape as another proof of her guilt."

"They will be watching the Ostian Highway as well, if that is what your friend Niobe and her husband are planning," Lady Maxima put in.

"The authorities are on the watch for a vestal. A pure and delicate lady. Serena must look quite the opposite."

Serena protested, "I don't understand. They've no real evidence against me."

Senator Cato waved away her objections. "The woman Lo-

custa who sell herbs and potions is willing to swear Lady Serena bought a large vial of mandragora juice supposedly for an old dog who was to be destroyed. An overdose of mandragora juice killed Prince Britannicus and we all know whose hand administered that dose on the evening of his death."

Lady Maxima caught her breath but Serena, raising her head at a memory, cut in sharply, "She gave it to me! Locusta, the red-haired woman. That's who she was. I knew I'd seen her before. She was one of the serving women around Octavia and Britannicus the night I was called to help him. The night he died. She had her hair covered and looked older. But it was Locusta. She went off to get the barley water for him, and she gave it to me."

Senator Cato shrugged his thick shoulders. "I don't doubt it. But in a trial before Agrippina's own judges, with none but her witnesses, the thing could be over by nightfall, and Lady Serena dead and buried by tomorrow's sunrise." The two women shuddered, but he went on firmly, "By the time the vestal's innocence is proven to Nero and his prefect, her bones will be rotting in some field."

Lady Maxima spoke before Serena could get a word out of her dry throat. "Something must be done at once. Obviously, you have an idea."

For the first time Senator Cato smiled. "Naturally. One of your slave women will leave the Vestals' House within the hour to get water from the vestals' fountain. She will be taken to Ostia by Niobe and Captain Glaucus. And from there to the emperor in Corinth. The emperor is the only one who can help her now. Need I say, this so-called slave will be Lady Serena?"

"But we planned on a land journey. Sea voyages are so hazardous."

"Hardly more so than a land journey pursued by Agrippina's spies. Therefore, Lady Serena goes by sea. A simple slave woman in the service of Niobe and the captain. Niobe will help Lady Serena as best she can. And her friend Lycon will protect her. Meanwhile, Agrippina's spies will pay little attention to our vestal by the time her features and her hair are properly disguised. Daubed with rouge and kohl, her hair dyed black, she can borrow one of your slave's gowns. Remember. She must look like any other slave in the city. Careless, dirty. Half-naked—"

"What!" Hagar gasped, forgetting herself in her dismay.

"Figuratively speaking. Haven't you ever looked at the other female slaves wandering about the Forum? Sexual temptation, all of them." The senator also forgot himself and the seriousness of the present, to grin, then recovered quickly. "Just remember, she must look as unlike a vestal virgin as possible. Tattered. A great deal of flesh, her sensuous shrug at a stranger. She gives a tired, fat old senator the eye. . . . These are the things that will throw Agrippina's spies off the scent. And by the way, that vestal headdress must be changed, above all. Let her hair fall loosely. Cover part of her face. But hurry. Hurry!"

The lash of his stern voice set them to work quickly. The senator was let out of a servant's door by Hagar, who came back to join Serena and Lady Maxima, carrying a surprising collection of paints and oils.

"Stole them from Lady Clea's young slave," she said proudly. "And here's a rag of a gown that belonged to one of the kitchen women. She died of the marsh fever last month."

Serena's situation was so terrifying that she didn't feel any qualms when she slipped the dead slave's faded, mended, and too-short gown over her now-naked body. The cords at the waist were tied loosely, but all the same, Serena blushed when she saw her reflection in the bright silver mirror. Even at Nero's evening party near Baiae she had never seen so much of her flesh exposed. All of her throat and nearly all of her breasts. Hagar tried vainly to pull the wide neckline higher on her shoulders, all the while "tut-tutting" and looking displeased.

"Don't think about it," Lady Maxima advised, still practical. "Here. Throw this wool scarf around your shoulders. It is heavy enough, at least until you reach the ship."

Having dyed Serena's golden hair as dark as henna, soot, and kohl would make it, then briskly rubbing it dry, Hagar started to paint Serena's eyelids and lashes with black kohl, and Serena said confidently, "As long as Hagar, my dear dragon, is with me, I'll feel quite safe. Besides, I trust Lycon. He saved Hagar and me in that Subura brothel."

Lady Maxima, critically surveying Hagar's expert hand, remarked, "I hope you do trust this Lycon. And Senator Cato's old . . . friend Niobe."

Hagar looked at the senior vestal, interrupting Serena's assurance. "Beg pardon, august lady, but if Lycon hadn't meant

my lady well, he could have betrayed her presence in the brothel. Instead, he helped us out, so no one suspected we'd been in that place."

Lady Maxima agreed. "But if I hadn't received the solemn word of Senator Cato that this Captain Glaucus and his wife are trustworthy, I couldn't let you go. Still, it is a risky business."

"Until the emperor returns from Athens, my lady, it may be risky for all of Rome," Serena put in. "Anyway, I'll have Hagar."

"No. You won't."

"What!"

"But, august lady, surely—"

Both women were so shocked at this news that Serena jumped and Hagar almost stuck a finger in her eye.

"My children. . . ." The senior vestal was a trifle younger than Hagar, but they recognized the sincerity of this odd salutation. "Everyone on the Palatine must know by now that where Serena goes, her beloved Hagar is her shield and guardian; so I am sending Hagar north on the Via Flaminia, in the company of one of my slaves suitably well dressed. This young 'lady' will be presumed to be Serena, I hope. She won't wear our headdress, of course. That would be sacrilege and forbidden by law. But even that should be to our advantage, since they will expect Serena to be somewhat disguised. We hope the empress's men will waste some days pursuing Hagar and my slave."

Serena marveled again at the devious mind of the senior vestal. Who would have thought it possible of so holy a woman?

Since Hagar and Lady Maxima had seen the changes in Serena's face by the dark hair, the addition of heavy black on her eyes and lashes, a dusty red flush over her cheeks, and soft pink on her lips, they were not as startled as Serena when she saw her new face reflected in the mirror. In fact, she didn't recognize it as her own.

"I might as well be found in a brothel! My hair. So dark and disheveled. And my eyes!"

"Don't be ridiculous, my dear. All women—except vestals, of course—paint themselves. Do you want to look quite unlike any other female?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't think."

"You are a slave woman. Remember that. What name, Hagar?"

"Cleopatra?"

Lady Maxima said, "A little obvious. Charmian. That should serve."

Minutes later, beginning to be invigorated by her wild disguise, Serena kissed both women good-bye and slipped out the side door into the Forum with a water jar on her shoulder. Two Praetorian guards eating apples lingered much too casually near the front entrance to the Vestals' House. They glanced at Serena as she passed, and one of them whistled at her bared legs. After an instant of shock, she winked, a kind of experiment, the first in her life, and hurried on. Fortunately, their orders kept them from following her.

She was less sure of herself by the time she reached the old public fountain used by the poorest foreigners and slaves, those who couldn't afford piped water, and by the vestals as a part of their sacred ritual. She looked around furtively but saw no pair, male or female, who might be Lycon's Captain Glaucus and his wife, Niobe. She had just leaned over the fountain's mouth the second time, after spilling the water deliberately, when a heavy, chuckling voice behind her made her drop the jar.

"You, there, girl! I've been tracking you all over Rome. Come along."

She felt hard, callused fingers fasten on her forearm. When she swung around to face her captor, she found herself looking up at a huge, grizzled man with laughing eyes and a big grin that gleamed amid curly gray whiskers.

His booming voice lowered. "I'm Captain Glaucus, my lady. Excuse the bad manners, but this has got to look real."

A buxom, youngish woman with blowsy auburn hair and a friendly look about her wide mouth winked at Serena. "I'm Niobe. Don't be afraid."

Feeling much more secure, Serena nodded, then wrung her hands, looked around like one seeking help, and let herself be shoved along through the busy, shifting crowd. Few paid any attention. Runaway slaves were not that unusual. In the Vicus Tuscus, a street leading down to the cattle forum, Captain Glaucus lifted her into a cart, guided the indifferent horse down to the docks, and Serena found herself on a barge loaded with cheap city-made souvenirs, kitchen ware, and

household furniture bound for trading in the busy coastal towns of the Greek peninsula, as Captain Glaucus explained.

The Tiber inspection was nerve-racking to Serena, but the police spent all their time on the cargo.

"What are they looking for?" Serena asked Niobe when she could no longer bear the suspense.

"Taxable goods. The city of Rome is charged certain taxes on wheat, for instance. Then they export it to other ports with a higher tax. If it's carried direct to other ports, Rome loses her taxes. We can't have that. Shocking!"

"Smugglers do this?"

Niobe laughed. "Where there's a tax, there'll be a smuggler."

Whatever they were looking for, the inspectors didn't find it on the barge, and soon went to other vessels. Everyone wanted to get business settled before sunset. The state funeral had caused expensive delays, and no one seemed interested in Captain Glaucus' slave girl, who was certainly pretty, but from the look of her, no better than she should be. While the captain and the men at the ropes and barge poles worked to get the load downriver between the maze of traffic, Niobe invited Serena to curl up her dirt-stained bare legs and settle against a floor cushion, to watch their last view of the great city.

"Glad to be free of it," Niobe remarked cheerfully. "Only thing good about it is that I met Glaucus here. I was still with Senator Cato at the time, but he played the gallant friend when he found Glaucus wanted to marry me. Gave me up, and also gave me a very handsome 'going-away' present."

Serena found the woman's free and easy speech comforting. Whatever Niobe's previous morals, she was evidently a good woman to know. She survived and moved onward in life. Serena was thinking very seriously of survival since the awful moments at Damaris' grave.

Now that she could breathe a little easier, Serena began to worry about Philip. Suppose by the time she reached Greece, the imperial party had embarked for Brundisium? Above all, she must avoid that city, where Agrippina would be a murderous enemy. However, she warmed herself on the long river journey by bringing her thoughts back to a distant future with Philip. And it was hard to remain depressed while Niobe chattered on in her good-natured way.

By mid-evening of that blustery, threatening day that had

seen Damaris' death and Serena's own deadly danger, Captain Glaucus started Serena up the rope ladder into the waist of a large vessel whose mainmast, two banks of oars and great square sails told her that this was the *Pericles*, a bireme once used in war but now refurbished for trading from Greece and the coast of Asia Minor all the way to Gaul.

Serena was relieved to see her friend Lycon's rugged face peering over the ship's rail, and to have his hands outstretched, lifting her onto the deck. For the benefit of the ship's crew Serena was treated as a slave purchased by Niobe, who seemed to enjoy all this playacting.

"I told you you'd never escape us . . ." She hesitated.

"Charmian," Serena announced suddenly, playing her part.

"Well Charmian, I see my man's cuffed you around a bit. But a good meal will fix you up."

"Get about your business, all of you," Captain Glaucus ordered, and Niobe walked with Serena and Lycon to a corner near the peculiar prow of the ship curved in the Greek style, where the closest sailor was the young pilot balanced precariously with one hand clasping the upward curve while his other arm made waving motions in preparation for directing the ship out of the harbor.

Serena looked over the rail and saw the point of a three-pronged metal and wood device below the curved beak and asked in surprise, "Are we on a war ship?"

Niobe looked a trifle taken back, which puzzled Serena, but Lycon said quickly, "The ship was rotting in the harbor at Corinth. I bought it and had it repaired. What with piracy and smuggling, and war liable to break out at sea sometimes, it's better to be prepared. By the way, I am still known as Lycon in Greece. I am the son of Aristides, a trader. There are many Lycons in Greece, and I've paid a few gold pieces into certain coffers so that I can visit Rome harbors without violating the sentence of that villainous prefect Tigellinus."

Serena stiffened but was not in a position to defend Philip from this man who, very probably, was saving her life.

She was relieved when Niobe's voice, forever bubbling with gaiety, changed the subject. "You'll like the waters around Greece. You never saw anything so blue. A bit rough before we get there, but I don't suppose you will mind. Lycon says it's important you see the emperor. Must be nice to know emperors like that. They say he's very athletic and powerful. I like that in a man."

Lycon laughed. He looked as quietly powerful and solid, as dependable as Serena had thought of him since the night in the Subura. But there was an edge to his laughter, and Serena suddenly remembered where he had encountered the present emperor. It was on the night of the Emperor Claudius' death, when Lycon was brought in to taste the imperial mushrooms. Lycon must have seen the Empress Agrippina's sturdy son who helped Serena in her efforts to cure the suffering Claudius.

"He is a fine athlete. But he's a friend of Tigellinus. I'll avoid him in Greek waters if it's all the same to you."

Serena winced. "I must confess, Lycon, that I expect Tigellinus will help me with the emperor. But I give you my solemn word I will never mention your name to the prefect, or anyone in his service."

"I know that, my lady," he assured her quietly.

The three of them were relieved when Captain Glaucus strolled by, pointed out the ramming device below the prow, and boasted happily, "If there's a pirate left in the Mediterranean, they'll think twice before attacking the *Pericles*. I once speared a galley on that ramming point. The whole ship went down, slaves, crew, and all. Watched every man of 'em drown."

Serena concealed her shock at these grisly details, and managed to remark graciously, "We are in safe hands, then."

"None safer." The cream-white of his short-sleeved tunic belted in heavy, studded brass only made the curly gray hair on his arms more noticeable, but as Serena decided, all this strength and that of his employer, Lycon, would be employed in her defense. He said, "We'll be moving out on the tide. I like to give my rowers a little help when I can and we've a good following wind tonight. Soon as we're out beyond this accursed new harbor they're forever building, either I or my wife will be happy to show you to the cabin. You'll share it for the voyage, august lady. You're welcome to cabin alone but it might look odd to the crew. A slave woman, and all."

"I understand, and thank you."

Niobe brushed aside her husband's apologies. "Go along, Glaucus, my love. We've no need of you. We'll stay here, out from under foot. You just get us far away from Rome and we'll thank you."

Captain Glaucus, looking like an ancient, cheerful sea god, pinched Niobe's chin, promised, "I'll just do that, my

beauty," and strode off. Minutes later, they heard him bellow orders to the hortator who controlled the rhythm and precision so necessary to the rowers on the deck below. Within seconds the heavy beat of the hortator's hammer rose from the fetid interior of the vessel and reverberated against the deck on which the two women stood. With the rudder man at his post abovedecks, the watch climbed to his little basket high on the mainmast.

The long, double file of galley slaves lining each length of the ship's hull, one row of slaves above and slightly forward of the one on the rank below, hauled back on the oars, and the ship trembled into motion. The small lateen sails were already fluttering, and the massive square sails soon billowed with the night breeze.

"Be happy, my lady," Lycon advised in a low voice. "You are safe now."

Serena agreed, but she leaned far out over the rough, salt-rimmed rail to see the last of the Ostian Harbor. Even at night Ostia looked busy. Nero had ordered deeper dredging, new decks and warehouses, tasks which put hundreds to work and made it possible to receive larger cargoes of the precious wheat that was the mainstay of Rome's food supply. Lantern lights twinkled in semicircles around the new docks and the breakwater as slaves and freedmen coming on the midnight shift started to work.

It was of small interest to Serena. She was thinking about Philip. Where was he now, at this minute? Was it possible he had already started home from Greece?

Suppose Philip had lied to her about his hopes for the future. Except for the empress, there seemed to have been no other serious love in his life until Serena. Everyone said he had been faithful to Agrippina for more than a score of years. Agrippina herself had destroyed that loyalty of his by her murders, her evil scheming; so the loyalty that had gone to her for so long, turned to her son, Nero. Philip Tigellinus would never betray the boy he had helped to rear. But the sensual love he had borne for Agrippina during that score of years—could Serena be sure that it had turned to her?

Seeing her haunted expression, Lycon and Niobe exchanged glances and deliberately tried to turn the gloomy direction of her thoughts. Lycon pointed to a lighthouse along the coast, and Niobe chattered, "Oh, look, Lycon! See how it flickers

and fades with the wind. Pity any little boats that hug that shore."

An alternate steersman passed them, staring with interest at the new "slave girl."

Lycon watched the man's face, frowning. "You'll have to be on your guard at all times, my . . . that is, my dear Charmian. We four can't really trust anyone but ourselves, can we?"

There was never a moment's peace or security, Serena sighed as the lights of Ostia faded behind the double white wake of the *Pericles'* oars. . . . What do I know about eternal passion? she thought. To love once and think it is forever. . . . She said fiercely, answering her own doubts, "It is forever!"

Her companions looked surprised, and Serena apologized. "It seems I'm beginning to take my mad-vestal role seriously. I now talk to myself."

Lycon wasn't amused. He glanced around, then reminded her, "Just remember that if you betray yourself, you will make the empress happy. You don't want to do that, do you?" His arm loosely enclosed her at the rail. It was as if he had forgotten his arm was there. Its presence was warm and comforting in the cold, unknown night, so Serena made no effort to evade it. Lycon was right, of course. Her only consolation was that at least she no longer must pretend to be mad. Madness wouldn't help her now.

Seeing how tired she looked, the shadows across her face accentuated by her dyed black hair, Niobe presently led the now-chilled vestal the length of the deck to a steep ladder of steps through the hatchway into the regions below. The ladder of stairs could be raised and fastened to the deck above. Serena, like all vestals, had spent her years in strenuous exercise of her duties and found the descent by ladder stairs no more difficult than the carrying of heavy amphorae from the sacred well, or remaining on her feet all night to guard the vestal flame and the tiny hut supposedly built by King Numa in Rome's dark ages.

At the foot of the stairs a partition separated them from the long midships quarter. The small space given over to the two women was the only aftercabin. Serena looked around, aware that this had been the captain's own cabin. There was a window, shuttered and curtained for the night, above a heavy chest on four legs, used by the captain for his accounts. The wax tablets and a broken stylus were still there. Clearly, Cap-

tain Glaucus didn't trust accountants. The bed was huge, with a peculiar high headboard unlike the low, rolled and carved headboards found in Roman homes. A folding cot such as those frequently used in the army had been made up, like a big bed, with clean, mended blankets.

The cabin was better than Serena had a right to expect. But the stench was frightful.

Niobe sniffed and laughed. "Smells like something's dead around here. Want to know where it comes from?"

They both looked out through the open door, beyond the narrow passage to the wooden partition which had been built from the gangdeck to the deck above. It was warped and badly put together. The door in the partition itself was hardly more than three boards slapped together with wooden pegs. Behind that partition were four long rows of naked, hairy creatures at the oars, two rows below and two above, their flesh glistening with sweat even on this chilly night.

"Smell's ghastly, doesn't it?" Niobe remarked. "It's those poor devils at the oars."

Serena was shocked. It was the first time she had ever observed galley slaves at their oars. "Are they all prisoners, sentenced to the galleys?"

Niobe took a certain pleasure in the great vestal's naiveté. "Gods, no! This isn't a military vessel. The lower rank—they have the easier job—are slaves leased out by a Massilia businessman. They may make enough to buy their freedom. On the upper rank—that's the bad job—many of them are freedmen. The pay is good, for strong workers without much skill. And they may be of use in case we are attacked."

"Attacked! I thought pirates had been destroyed by Pompey and other Romans."

Niobe avoided her eyes. "Who knows? There are all sorts of enemies to an enterprising captain." She waved aside unimportant matters. "My lady—I mean, Charmian—may we dine together, such as it is? A supper at midnight to keep our spirits up?"

Though she was too tense to be hungry, Serena agreed eagerly. She had no idea how or where they would be eating their meals, but at the moment she welcomed the company that would keep her from painful thoughts.

When they were two hours out of Ostia and almost, though not quite, getting used to the blows of the hortator's hammers that rumbled through hull and decks alike, Niobe came

back to the cabin, uncovered the window embrasure, and had two couches made ready for dinner around a little table in their center. The night breeze fluttered the open velvet curtains, and Serena, glancing out, could see the stars high overhead. Niobe's jolly face was bright with excitement.

"We should have a happy dinner, Charmian. Lycon was afraid the Empress Agrippina might discover what you are up to, but some of the sailors have just reported the latest gossip about her, and I think you are safe."

"The empress is no longer interested in my welfare. I hope," Serena said politely.

"Oh, better. She is miles away from Rome by now, of course." Serena knew this, but Niobe went on in triumph. "She went to Brundisium."

Serena began to feel a premonition. "To inspect the eastern end of the Appian Way, I know. Repairs, or something."

"No, no. That's only the pretense." Niobe clasped her hands. "An old love. She went to wait for the Praetorian prefect, Tigellinus. It's said he was in a great hurry to reach Rome. But he won't have to go that far. They'll have their love reunion in Brundisium. So you see, she will be too busy to think about you, my lady," she added as an afterthought.

Dry-lipped and speechless, Serena stared at her. "How do the sailors know this?"

Niobe was polite but anxious to get on with preparations for dinner. "The whole of Brundisium talked of it. By this time the lovers will be in each other's arms. The reunion should be very affecting, they say."

When the captain, his wife, and Lycon arrived for dinner an hour later, in what was actually the middle of the night, Serena couldn't think of anything she needed less than food. For a few minutes after the news of Philip's possible defection to his old love, she had wanted to die. The crash of the hortator's hammers seemed to pierce her skull, and the only peace was to be found in the sunny blue depths of the Mediterranean. But this suicidal reaction scarcely lasted longer than the fleeting passage of the thought itself.

Apparently Philip was a one-woman man, after all. She had always known that. All of Rome knew it. And when Agrippina, with a chance to become empress, turned from him to marry a third time, he found comfort in the affections of Serena, and his pursuit of one of the "untouchable" vestal virgins. She believed he had been genuine in his—what?—affection for her, but it could hardly compete against his lifetime devotion to Agrippina.

"Well, let her have him," she told herself with a low, fierce sound like a growl in her throat, which was swollen with the effort to keep from weeping. She tried to remember Hagar's remark over some minor calamity long ago: "You are vulnerable, my lady; yet you always rise up again to do battle with the world. That's what counts."

It was small comfort, but she mustered her courage and followed the wizened male slave to the dinner couch.

The dinner was exquisite to the eyes, nostrils, and the taste. There were broken chunks of crusty bread, delicious broiled fish with white flesh, and endless fruits of all colors, some with what appeared to be hairy skins but tender pink or golden hearts, some as red and round as a sunset. All delicious and some not easily obtained in Rome itself. To Serena, however, they tasted like straw.

Worst of all, the most popular topic of dinner conversation

was the reunion between the widowed empress and her one-time lover. Captain Glaucus kept telling salacious jokes about imaginary dialogues between Agrippina and Philip Tigellinus. . . . Agrippina with her three dead husbands, whose presence, or abrupt absence, hadn't frightened off the prefect.

"Did you know, Charmian"—Glaucus turned to Serena in his jovial way,—“that the empress's second husband, Passienus Crispus, also died after eating a dish of mushrooms? Of course, the story is that he had hired two muscular fellows to strangle young Nero. So husband number two probably deserved poisoning.”

Dryly Niobe said, “Either the prefect has courage, or he lacks a taste for mushrooms.”

The captain and Lycon joined in a knowing laugh, but Serena's forced smile was so belated it aroused the attention of the others on the couch, big, bluff Glaucus and Niobe, comfortably resting on one elbow.

Lycon, being the fourth and therefore the odd number, reclined on his own couch but with his troubled hazel eyes watching Serena's every move.

“Are you all right?” he asked quietly during a brief lull in Niobe's chatter. Staring out the stern window at the stars thick as pebbles on a deep-shadowed bench, Serena laughed. It was a curious flat sound, with no mirth in it. She caught herself, reached for an olive, and began to eat it. Aware that the others were looking at her, she steadied her fingers, which shook a little.

“You will soon get used to the sea, Charmian,” Niobe assured her, supposing she was seasick. “Then your appetite will return.”

Serena recovered herself with an effort. Shortly after, to her relief, the exuberant captain, with the more sober and thoughtful Lycon, left the women to their cabin. Lycon lingered, taking Serena's hand.

“When you worry, my lady . . .”

“Serena.”

He seemed oddly touched by this permission. “Serena, just remember, if that blackhearted prefect fails you, I won't. I owe you my life. Collect it whenever you need it.” He touched her fingers with his lips. His deep feelings made her a little uneasy, but she didn't try to release herself, merely smiling her good night.

He left. He looked back but she had turned away and saw only a brief glimpse of his serious features.

Since Serena was presumed by the ship's company to be Niobe's slave, she chose to sleep on the cot, and Niobe, a little the worse for wine, flopped onto the big bed.

"I'm keeping the captain from his bed," Serena apologized.

"Rubbish, my dear. Glaucus would take the late watch even if you weren't here. Besides, this way, I get a nice big bed to myself when I need it. And . . . I . . . do . . . need it." Fully dressed, she closed her eyes and began to snore.

Philip was present in Serena's dreams that night, and so very much the man she loved that she woke wondering how she could have believed the gossip of a few sailors, and by dawn she managed to recover some, if not all, of the serenity that had been the hope of her parents when they named her.

Having borrowed a slightly more presentable gown and shift from Niobe, Serena was better able to move about from the aftercabin to the deck above without worrying about the open invitation she presented to the crew.

By the time she had gotten used to the between-decks ladder several days later, still pressing her hands to her head in a fruitless effort to close out the beat of the hortator's hammers, she was cheerful and optimistic: The watch was changing, but the hammers never lost their beat.

She had managed to deaden most sounds and therefore heard nothing in the passage below her until she felt the ladder frame shake under her hands as another weight was thrust upon the steps. Holding on, she looked behind her, saw the huge, sweating face of the hortator going off duty, so close on the ladder his bulbous mouth rubbed against her bare upper arm.

No doubt the contact was an accident. She had stopped suddenly, and he was close behind her. Her startled exclamation warned him. She didn't like his smirk, or the look in his heavy-lidded eyes, which reminded her of the Praetorians the night Philip saved her from them. And this fellow was enormous. She had never seen a man so gross and fleshy. But in fairness to him, she realized her wanton gown and disheveled, dyed hair had invited this intimacy. She tried to move upward on the steps, but the great, wet hands crept up, closing around her hips.

"Come on, pretty one. Ain't they told you about old Jorum? Want to know what old Jorum does to pretty girls?"

He began to mutter words she didn't understand, but the meaning was unmistakable.

She didn't want to scream for help, to bring his superiors into this ridiculous, if vile, scene. It would go hard with the hortator. She let herself fall limp in his hands; then, as he was thrown off guard by her yielding body, she gave a sudden twist, slipped out of his fingers, and scrambled up until she could touch the deck above. He grasped her bare ankle and twisted it so painfully she cried out, but she was too angry now to beg for help.

Looking over her shoulder again, she spat full in his eye. He blinked, yelled, let her go, and slipped down rung after rung to the deck below. She saw him glaring up at her out of the gray deck, heard him curse and then the vow, punctuated by one fleshy raised fist: "You'll pay, you harlot! They don't make fun of Jorum, not without paying!"

Serena limped across the deck, rubbed her ankle, and welcomed the breeze that cooled off her anger. Lycon, looking windblown and very masculine, joined her almost at once. He leaned over the rail beside Serena, looked into her face and then back at the ladder.

"Trouble, my lady?"

She smiled. "Charmian."

"No. Charmian could take care of herself, but the Lady Serena might not be used to this offal that a seaman has to hire these days."

"I twisted my ankle."

He studied her ankle, asked quietly, "Twisted it in three places? Looks like three nasty finger marks there." She didn't like his suddenly flushed look, the anger he couldn't contain. Had he looked like this when he killed his father? At once she despised herself for the thought. Before she could answer, he left her, strolled over to the ladder, and squinted as his eyes accustomed themselves to the dusk on the deck below after the bright sunlight.

"You down there. Jorum. Pick up your pay in Messana. You've been beached."

The hortator mumbled a protest, but Captain Glaucus walked away in the middle of it and rejoined Serena.

"It wasn't his fault," she explained. "He must have seen me in that other gown and thought he had a right to me."

"No one has a right to you." His voice shook. He cleared his throat, avoided her eyes, looked out at the choppy sea.

"That's how I think of you, Serena. The untouchable vestal." She tried to speak, but he went on rashly, blurting it out. "Jorum is nothing. I could kill him. But only when I pretend he is the noble Praetorian prefect. No one said anything, but I knew whenever we mentioned his name. There is something between you. Not physically, perhaps. Even he wouldn't dare that. But there is a tie."

"No!" It was desperate, a cry that betrayed her, but she added, "I am a vestal. Anything else is forbidden."

He studied her face for a long time. "I'm sorry. I didn't intend to say it. It's only that if I thought he had taken you, I would take you myself. Any way I could get you!"

She said wryly, "And you talked of giving your life to me. So much for my trust in you!"

He recovered after a moment's tense silence. "I'm sorry, I never meant you to know. But I wouldn't hurt you. Never touch you against your will. Can we forget it?"

"Gladly." She held out her hand. He clasped her palm and wrist in friendly fashion, and the subject changed.

But the episode troubled her mood. Being coveted and hated and cursed all in one day were new sensations to a vestal, and she found the experience and its aftermath hard to forget. She needed no more enemies. Agrippina was quite enough.

The ship dropped anchor off Sicily to deliver supplies from Rome and pick up jars of olives and wine. It also left Jorum, the hortator, and picked up another powerful man, less likely to have an eye on Captain Glaucus' women. Serena did not forget the last look Jorum gave the ship, and especially herself, when he dropped his heavy weight into the longboat that took the first of the crew ashore. Clearly, he promised to pay her back.

She was glad when Niobe and Lycon invited her to go ashore with them several hours later. It was good to think of something else for a while, and Niobe's presence gave the excursion an impersonal mood. She had a delightful, carefree day wandering the port of Messina with her friends, without once seeing the sinister, sweating face of Jorum, the hortator, and she almost forgot that in a week or two she must begin worrying again when she landed in Greece. If Philip was with Agrippina, would Nero help her? Acté was a good friend. But could one count on the influence of the ex-mistress of an exceedingly popular emperor? Even if Acté no longer had

any hold upon him, it would be good to know that she was near.

Serena climbed aboard the *Pericles* actually singing with Lycon and Niobe after three glasses of the strong Sicilian wine. It came as a small shock to be reminded by Captain Glaucus' careless words as he pointed to the Sicilian port, which appeared to be burning in the sunset light: "And to think that devil of a prefect, Tigellinus, was born on that island! Too bad the volcano didn't get him before he ever left for Rome!"

Lycon looked at Serena, who wanted to protest but wisely did not.

They passed through the Ionian Sea in the next few days, following the barren coast of southern Italy, and to relieve the many moments of shipboard tedium, Niobe and Serena studied the map Captain Glaucus spread out on the low, round table which normally held the food served for their meals.

"The *Pericles* takes us to the Isthmus of Corinth," Niobe pointed out. "Glaucus and Lycon will cross the isthmus with you. We've goods to deliver in that city. You will find the emperor's quarters. They'll return to the *Pericles* without you."

"But wishing you well," Lycon put in, leaning over Niobe's shoulder and running his fingers close to Serena's on the map. "If you don't locate the emperor's party, we'll take you back to the ship with us."

Niobe put out her hand. "I swear it, my lady. Lycon doesn't lie. When he says a thing, he means it."

Ignoring this unfortunate assurance about Lycon, Serena thanked them. In their half-joking mood it was not a moment to grow emotional about her deep gratitude for what they had done to save her.

Yet, as the *Pericles* proceeded past the toe and heel of the Italian boot, she couldn't avoid wondering what she would do if it actually became necessary to return from Corinth to the *Pericles*. Philip would help her in Rome, but did he have enough power, and would he use it against Agrippina?

One violent, windy morning on the calends of March, Serena was surprised by the heightened beat of the hortator's hammers and the creaking of oarlocks. The galley slaves pulled back, dipped, pulled at a much faster rate, a tempo they couldn't possibly keep up for long, she thought.

After dressing hurriedly, she rushed up on deck. Captain Glaucus was pointing out the nearest landfall to Lycon. Niobe seemed well acquainted with this run of the *Pericles* and merely stood by studying the excellent torso of the half-naked young sailor climbing the mast to the basket-shaped perch used by the watch.

"What is it?" Serena asked anxiously. "Why are we hurrying?"

The captain motioned her to the rail. "We passed the peninsula off the Gulf of Tarentum in the night. Government ships often hide there, like sharks hoping to snap up us poor fish. But we've missed them. That's the east coast of Italy there, facing the Adriatic. At the northern end of the peninsula is Brundisium. Won't be many days before we're moving along the coast of Greece."

Something about it worried Serena. Why should government ships lie in wait for trading vessels like the *Pericles*? Was the *Pericles* carrying contraband, in spite of Niobe's assurance to her that day on the Tiber barge?

Rough waters and heavy winds slowed the speed of the bireme despite the sunny skies overhead. A sudden spray of saltwater caught Serena full in the face, and she went below to dry off, especially her hair, which would need to be dyed again soon. The watch had just changed, and the rickety door onto the rowers' deck remained ajar. Trying to dry the long, snarled strands of her hair between her hands, Serena peeked through at the slaves. Those exhausted rowers who had come off duty collapsed in the gutters that paralleled the narrow gang deck. Here an overseer patrolled with a lash attached to a short club. The lash didn't seem to be used often. The threat over the rowers' heads was enough. In view of the exhaustion plainly shown by the rowers curled up in the scuppers where saltwater seepage ran, Serena was surprised to find that the rowers going on duty looked neither cowed nor seething with fury. Merely stoic. Their bodies, powerfully developed through the chest and arms, tapered to wretched and spindly legs.

Some of the off-duty rowers sucked sponges of posca, the vinegary wine of the poor. A few attacked chunks of honey-soaked bread passed out to them. The rest seemed to lie in a stupor.

Feeling depressed over their condition and the obvious necessity for the existence of galley slaves, Serena was just

turning away when she heard an order bellowed to the hortator at the end of the two banks of oars. Something had happened abovedecks. The hortator's hammers began to raise and lower faster. The beat increased. The oars drew back, followed by a brief instant's feathering, then plunged deep again, moving with precision to the faster beat. The eerie screech of the oar ports pierced the eardrums, almost making Serena forget the fall of the hammers on worn and sunken wooden blocks.

Before Serena could get to the deck, Captain Glaucus' heavy weight shook the ladder coming down through the hatchway. He passed her without a word, disappearing like magic beneath a metal grid cover over another hatchway to the hold below. In another minute his second in command raced along the gang deck between the rowers, burst through the doorway past Serena, and likewise climbed down into the hold. The rowers increased their beat again. Clearly, the ship was racing away from some pursuer, and the captain's panic-stricken attention to the hold told Serena what she had suspected. The *Pericles* was carrying smuggled goods.

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By the time Serena crossed the aftercabin and looked out the stern window, several small vessels with triangular lateen sails were in close pursuit. The *Pericles*, however, with two banks of oars, her powerful square sails and a following wind, seemed to be outdistancing the little boats, even as Serena watched.

It was Lycon who came to her while she watched nervously, wondering what was the penalty for those caught smuggling taxable goods. She was not reassured by the tight look on his ruddy face. He took her by the shoulders.

"I swore to keep you out of those bloody imperial hands, and I will! I'd no idea that damned Glaucus was carrying contraband. No wonder he's been so obliging, asking no more than thirty percent of the cargo profits. Well it's too late now. He'll have to get rid of it."

"They are after this ship," she reminded him.

"I know. A sea patrol. Cover your gown. Put on one of Niobe's cloaks. If we are taken, you claim to be my wife." She did as he directed while he explained, "If you are considered a slave of a condemned man, you will become government property. Once they've proved Glaucus and the rest of us guilty, they can sell you at the nearest port."

She had a sudden hope. "Brundisium! Philip might . . ." She recollected. "No. He would be in Rome by now. But maybe the emperor will have arrived."

Lycon muttered, "The gods be thanked. If Tigellinus were here, it would be all over for me." He reminded her, "Don't forget. Someone else is in Brundisium. The last person in the world who should see you like this. It's all the proof Agrippina would need against you."

"Then let's hope they don't catch us." She pulled the worn black cloak around herself and climbed up the ladder out of the hatch with his help.

Once on deck she saw why Lycon had been pessimistic about their safety. Although they had outrun the little boats in their wake, more were gathering across their path, bright sails fluttering in the wind, while their single decks, low in the water, swarmed with sailors carrying daggers and knives for close fighting, a few archers, and javelin throwers.

Glaucus rolled his eyes skyward. "Holy Athena! Gray-eyed Athena! Protect your favorite son. Don't let them send warships."

His patron goddess must be with him, Serena thought as she watched the oars of the big bireme churn double paths of white foam between two of the little boats. A third, hardly larger than a longboat, then appeared directly in the *Pericles* path. Everyone near the *Pericles'* prow could see the single banks of oars feathering, pulling, scuttling to get the little boat out of the way of the bireme which threatened to run it down. The effort was in vain. Before the big ship could change course, with the *Pericles'* pilot holding onto the curved beak and frantically signaling directions with his left hand, the bireme ran down the smaller boat, splitting it end to end, carving its way relentlessly through the wreckage, the great double banks of oars cracking the heads and bodies of the helpless sailors and rowers thrown out of the overturned boat.

Sickened by the hideous carnage, whether accidental or deliberate, Serena swung around, away from the deck rail, covering her mouth with her knuckles. She had seen many charioteers die in the Circus Maximus, but they had courted danger and known the risks. These unfortunate men in the merchant fleet had only followed orders and were helpless to command their own fate.

She caught the sleeve of Niobe, who was running to the hatchway, probably to help get rid of the contraband cargo of wheat.

"Niobe! Aren't they going to rescue those sailors?"

Niobe's face was still jolly, a little redder than usual, but still laughing. This time the humor, heavily scornful, was aimed at Serena. "What a silly creature you are! Don't you know anything? We rescue them, and we betray ourselves." She jerked free of Serena's hand and climbed down the ladder.

Serena swung around, caught up a coil of hemp, and ran to the rail. There was nothing to which she could tie one end

of the rope. She was still trying to find a way to use the rope when Lycon reached her. Before she could make her demands, he pointed out that the *Pericles'* own oars made it impossible to pick up the floundering sailors from the ship's rails.

"Their own boats will pick them up. We've got to get out of these waters fast, before the big naval vessels come into action. If you've ever prayed hard, Serena, pray now that they haven't discovered what's happened to their little patrol. That damned Glaucus and his 'easy money'! How did the authorities find out about it? That's what I'd like to know!"

Still with the rope in her hands, Serena turned away from him and started along the deck toward the stern of the ship. She didn't care who had betrayed them. It no longer mattered. But she found that the twin rudders, operated by a steersman, likewise prevented any swimmers from approaching the bireme. The ship made strange patterns in the roiling waters, like the bones of a fish. They were tacking to get the starboard quarter out of sight of the patrol boats. Already, weighted bundles were being thrown overboard. Contrary to Serena's expectation, they sank rapidly, aided by the rapid soaking of the grain and the heavy weights attached.

Serena started back to the stern. The ship's company was so busy she appeared to be the first who saw the huge Roman trireme approaching the *Pericles* from the north, undoubtedly the seaport of Brundisium. Serena had no sense of distances at sea, but the naval vessel was rapidly closing the two or three Roman miles between it and the *Pericles*. With a thrill of horror she realized all that capture entailed, especially capture near the port of Brundisium. She shouted to the steersman at the same time that the sailor on watch took up her cry.

Seeing the wild activity around her, she had never felt so helpless to do anything constructive except stay out of their way. Her hands itched to take the ropes that controlled the steering paddles, or to haul on every rag of canvas to outrun the big trireme, which rode high out of the water and whose long, three-banked oars made it look like a thousand-legged monster. The eagle of Rome and the legions were visible now on the massive square sail, a patriotic conceit of Admiral Anicetus, who commanded the fleet.

Nothing the *Pericles* did, no motion or sudden alternate tack, confused the trireme. It came plowing on through the churning blue waters that separated them. Now the *Pericles*

erupted into madness. Sailors sped past Serena, who felt strongly tempted to follow them when two men passed her on the run, Glaucus' own body slave and a young sailor, and both threw themselves overboard to join the remaining sailors of the crushed patrol boat flailing about in the waters. The two diving from the *Pericles* just missed the upper bank of oars, which dipped, feathered, and pulled an arm's length away. Serena could imagine why they chose the risk of drowning rather than capture. Lycon had made the penalties of capture very clear.

The imperial galley sailed close enough on the *Pericles'* port bow for Serena to make out the marines in armor, many with javelins poised, others with bows braced and arrows aligned to strike at targets on the deck of the fleeing ship. Lycon had gone below to urge greater speed from the hortator's gavels, and Serena could only watch with a cold despair quite beyond fear as the trireme moved inexorably nearer.

An imperial officer with a megaphone bellowed an order for the *Pericles* to heave to for boarders. This was followed by a command that the rowers be ordered to cease, but Serena could feel the increased beat of hammers reverberating along the deck under her feet. It seemed to Serena that only seconds later a shower of arrows fell upon the *Pericles'* after-deck. Several struck their targets, but the steersman kept his hand on the ropes that guided the two rudders, and still the *Pericles* plunged on. Another volley followed. Captain Glaucus had returned to the deck and was bawling orders for "More speed! More speed!" But his ship and its rowers had been pushed to their utmost exertion.

Having vainly called for speed, Glaucus ordered daggers to be passed out among those of the crew not armed. Dubious defense against the javelins of the front line and the broad, double-edged short swords of the imperial marines waiting in full view on the deck of the trireme. Serena had never seen a gladiator who looked more powerful, more experienced and deadly than that phalanx of marines.

One last spurt of speed put the *Pericles* ahead, but the trireme moved to starboard, coming in behind the stern of the *Pericles*, into position for ramming. After a moment's mad scramble, Serena came to stop by the mainmast and was kneeling over a dead sailor, trying to find his heartbeat, when the trireme's three-pronged ram jabbed its way into the stern quarter of the *Pericles* and the two ships locked together.

At the impact Serena was knocked across the body of the sailor. When she raised her head, the air was filled with the screech of the wounded ship and the mangled slaves on the gang deck below.

A wave of marines climbed over the stern and onto the deck, their steel helmets and swords blinding in the sun. Behind them, protected among the officers, Serena made out the gross body of Jorum, the hortator who had been dismissed at Messana. So it was he who had reported Captain Glaucus' cargo to the patrols! The muddy little eyes in that bloated face seemed to be searching for something. At last he saw Serena. She knew then what he had been searching for.

He tried to say something to the marines who stood in front of him, but there was too much activity on the decks for them to pay any attention to him. The uninjured crew of the *Pericles* was sent over to the trireme, followed more violently by the removal of Glaucus, Niobe, Lycon and the *Pericles'* first officer. Niobe's sobbing slave woman and Serena were carried across to the naval ship and set down upon the deck, where, less than an hour after the ramming the first step in their eventual fate was to be judged.

"She is my wife! Charmian. My wife!" Lycon insisted as he was thrust back to join Glaucus and Niobe.

Only Serena and Niobe's slave girl remained in front of the military altar on the Roman trireme, waiting to have their own fate decided. Lycon continued to protest, trying to protect her from the shrill insistence of Jorum, the hortator, and Serena was grateful. But behind her the incense still burned on the altar where the Roman admiral had made offering before the attack, and the acrid little trail of smoke was a constant reminder of Serena's sacrilege. She had no idea why the gods punished the dead and dying galley slaves of the *Pericles*, or the hopelessly wounded among the crew who were thrown into the sea almost before they breathed their last, but she knew her own guilt.

She had committed sacrilege against the hearth goddess when she lay with Philip. She had caused Jorum's betrayal of the *Pericles*. But in spite of her own guilt in ways that this stern, hawk-faced Admiral Anicetus could not guess, her pride came to her aid now. When he strode past her, was stopped by Jorum's bellowing, and looked her over again, she lied haughtily, "I am the wife of Lycon."

"A slave!" Jorum yelled. "Ask the other slave women. Everybody knows she's Niobe's slave."

Admiral Anicetus said quietly, "Will someone rid me of this noisy fellow?" But while the two marines pushed the still-yelling hortator away, the admiral turned to Niobe's terrified slave girl, as did most of the marines and sailors present.

"Well, woman, what do you say? Is this female a slave or the wife of the *Pericles'* owner?"

Trembling so that she found it difficult to speak, the girl admitted, "Captain Glaucus and my lady brought her back to the ship. They said she was their runaway slave. She was always spoken of as a slave. Lycon, the owner, did not sleep with her."

Anicetus glanced over at Niobe, who was held in a little group with her husband, Lycon, and other officers. She shrugged and nodded. Lycon muttered, "Bitch!" but she was unmoved. She had her own problems to worry about.

The hortator worked his way into the clear again to proclaim, "You see? I was right. The girl belongs to me. It was part of the deal."

Everything seemed to happen at once then. Serena pulled away from his greedy, seeking hands, and Lycon thrust aside two sailors and with his clenched fist knocked the hortator into the nearest marine. Jorum felt for the marine's sword, got it out of its sheath. With the hilt locked in both hands and crying, "Fires of Baal! You won't cheat me!" he plunged it hard at Lycon. The blow caught him in the breast.

Marines swarmed over the hortator, wrenching the blood-stained blade from Jorum's heavy fingers, and knocked him out with several blows from a three-pronged grappling hook. Stunned as if she herself had felt the sword thrust, Serena dropped to her knees with Lycon's head cushioned against her body. He tried to speak, but blood gushed from his mouth. She read the devotion in his eyes, and in her anguish, touched his forehead with her lips. He had been her true friend from the beginning. But even as she kissed him, and saw his glazed eyes staring up at her, she knew he was dead.

Anicetus leaned over, felt Lycon's heart, and looked at Serena. For that instant the stern, cold admiral of the fleet broke his code of public indifference.

"He is dead." She knew that. He said loudly, for all to hear, "This Lycon had not yet been tried, nor condemned.

The assassin will be punished." She knew that too. She knew Roman justice tried to be as fair as it was swift. What became of Jorum the murderer was immaterial to her. A friend had died to save her. That alone mattered.

In a surprisingly gentle voice the admiral asked her, "Have you proof of your marriage? Who was the priest? The witnesses?"

With her mind in a turmoil she wondered if she dared mention the vestals. Could she ask for Lady Maxima to come and identify her as a freedwoman?

Admiral Anicetus was studying her face. His puzzled frown worried her. "Haven't I seen you before? At the emperor's villa in Baiae? You are . . . let me see. You are . . ."

In another second or two he might guess, and nothing anyone could do or say would keep her from Damaris' fate if the vestal Serena was found like this with dyed hair, rouged cheeks, and painted eyelids.

"No! I was never in Baiae. Lycon found me in Rome. I am Charmian, a freedwoman."

An officer observing this suggested to Anicetus, "She isn't wearing a freedman's ring, Excellency. That scum was right. She is a slave. Even the captain's wife admits it."

The admiral looked Serena over, the woman's made-up face, the dirt stains on her bare legs, bloodstains from Lycon on the cheap gown, and he agreed. "Undoubtedly. Keep the two slave women together. They have no responsibility for the smuggling. Take the others below and hold them shackled for their trial. We'll sell the women in Brundisium, with the profits going to the Naval Fund."

It was not until she was taken to Brundisium with Thetis, Niobe's slave woman, both rigidly protected by and from their naval guards, that Serena found any hope of escape to Philip or to Rome. After giving up attempts to find a messenger who would save her without receiving anything but promises of future payment, Serena considered speaking to Admiral Anicetus. He had gone out of his way in directing a few kind words toward her at the time of Lycon's death. And he behaved oddly as the naval patrol sailed toward Brundisium, coming down more than once to look over the prisoners, especially the "slave women" kept alone. Thetis confided to Serena, "I think he may buy you. The way he studies you—anybody can see he is interested."

Serena was hardly overjoyed. She now feared he had guessed her identity. Only one faint hope survived. If he confronted her with the truth about herself, she might stress the enmity of Agrippina, since it was well known in court circles that the admiral and the empress didn't get along. Admiral Anicetus was Nero's man and felt that the emperor's mother held far too much power.

But his repeated visits and the cold surveys he gave Serena were not encouraging. Suppose his religious feeling were stronger than his dislike of Agrippina. And though she knew Nero's adherents socialized together so that he and Philip must know each other well, there was always the possibility that he might be jealous of Philip's influence with Nero. She abandoned the idea of appealing to him. The memory of Damaris' death was too vivid.

If only she hadn't extracted the promise from Philip that he would avoid her at all costs! When her life was at stake, and the possibility existed of being locked away forever in slavery, she began to find her moral scruples less noble. There

must be someone else who would carry a message to Philip in Rome.

On shipboard she had trusted the crusty but kindhearted old sailor who brought fruit, bread, and posca to her and Thetis in the hold. She promised him that the Praetorian prefect would pay him a hundred gold auriae to know where a freedwoman named Selina was. It was the closest she dared come to her own name. But the sailor took a fancy to the obliging Thetis, who forgot her fears and bloomed under his interest. Thetis assured him his age in no way distracted from his masculine charm, that, in fact, it enhanced his vigor. After this, he had a thousand reasons for not hurrying off to Rome to earn his hundred pieces of gold. For Serena, too, he was a blessing. While he and Thetis enjoyed their brief love affair, no one was likely to pay attention to her. An attitude she devoutly prayed would continue.

The weather deteriorated as the big trireme moved majestically into the crosscurrents of the Adriatic Sea. Thetis became seasick in the tightness of the hold, and after a struggle to get the girl's mind on other matters, Serena caught the contagion. Neither girl recovered until forced to more violent thoughts by the arrival of a different sailor with their main meal of the day, crusts of the hard but nourishing Roman bread, and a handful of half-crushed grapes.

Thetis roused herself to demand, "Where is my friend? Why hasn't he come? He's hurt!"

The big sailor grinned. "Old Gabrio? Like his type, do you?" He shoved the grapes against her lips. Thetis moaned and grabbed at the grapes before they could scatter on the damp, molding deck. The sailor pulled her up by the chin in order to see her face by the light from the hatchway overhead.

"Bah! You're a sickly sight. Old Gabrio can have you. . . . What's over there in the dark, glaring at us? An animal, I do believe," he teased, moving toward Serena. "A beautiful golden cat, I'd swear! Hungry, pretty puss? Come and get your cat food . . . puss, puss. . . . Not hungry?"

Serena slid back out of his reach, hating herself for her cowardice, but her stomach hurt and her head ached. She was almost too tired, too discouraged to fight him. Then he seized her leg and her arm, pulled her toward him.

"That's better. I was right. I can always feel out the beauties." Beneath her gown, his hands followed the curve of her

thighs and hips, teasing, arousing himself as his fingers began to stroke her inner thighs. He dropped upon her body. She could feel the hardness of him against the flesh of her abdomen and began to scream. The sound of her own voice from her parched throat, echoing through the hold, startled her attacker and terrified Thetis, who dropped her food and scrambled to the hatch ladder, screaming as wildly as Serena.

"He'll kill us! He'll kill us!"

The sailor's mood died under that racket. Deflated, he crawled off Serena's body and slapped her hard across the cheek just as two marines came clattering down the ladder. Before the sailor could pull himself together, he was struck across the back of the neck by a club and dragged up the ladder. Shortly after, Thetis' friend, Gabrio, came down to explain that the admiral would permit no one to despoil the two slaves. They would be worth more on the block if they had not been ill-used.

Thetis had already recovered and clung to Gabrio as her savior. It took Serena longer to regain her strength and confidence in herself. She felt that in spite of the sailor's failure to rape her, he had so nearly succeeded, she would never be clean again. She used all her drinking water to scrub her abdomen and thighs, but for the next days and nights in that hold, she could still imagine that the sailor had succeeded and she was hopelessly despoiled in her own eyes.

Only the arrival in Brundisium managed to convince her that she would one day be clean, for she must avoid being sold to some person who would have legitimate rights over her in any court.

On a windy morning late in March Serena and Thetis were shoved into a slave pen under the canvas-covered market within view of the Brundisium Bay. It was Serena's first glimpse of the busy harbor, the main port of embarkation for Greece. Until this morning she had been unable to send a word of any kind asking help of Philip or her acquaintances in Rome. On board the trireme and later in the gloomy cubicles of Brundisium where she was placed while the trial proceeded against Captain Glaucus and the others, each of her meager efforts had failed. It was hard to persuade anyone of the importance of her messages when she hadn't a sesterce with which to reward the messenger.

As the two women, Serena and Thetis, stood apart from the several other batches of slaves about to be put on sale,

Thetis whispered to her, "My master was found guilty yesterday. That's why we are here today."

Glaucus and Niobe had been kind to Serena in spite of the calamitous ending to the voyage. She asked anxiously, "What was the sentence?"

"Ten years in the Spanish tin mines for Captain Glaucus. Three years for my lady Niobe."

"Horrible!" She thought of Lycon dying in her arms and now the death in life to be suffered by those two vivacious and cheerful rogues. She looked around at the other slaves being readied for sale. It was altogether possible that the fate of Thetis and herself would be another kind of death in life.

The various groups of slaves were being herded, combed and curried to make the best impression on the buyers. Serena found herself hugging her bare arms and knew it was her way of covering herself from the speculative eyes of those buyers who strolled by the low wooden barrier and looked in. There were merchants of all nations, Roman soldiers, traders from Syria, Arabs from the Nabatean desert, Greeks by the dozen. In this motley crowd were a few Gauls and Spaniards, even Armenians whose kingdom acted profitably as a buffer between Rome and the oriental despotism of Far Parthia, once the mighty Persian Empire.

The strolling buyers discussed the penned-in human merchandise very much as Serena had discussed the lambs and the fowl she herself purchased for the holy sacrifices. Serena noted that Thetis rearranged her hair coquettishly, tried to look her best, to make herself desired. Serena had the opposite impulse, but was too proud and suddenly too angry to crumple up like a coward. She stood straight and haughty, grateful only that she had been given a clean gown to wear, hardly more decent than the one she had worn as Charmian, but at least she didn't have to look at the stains of Lycon's lifeblood all day and all night, the blood and the life he had sacrificed for her.

Thetis squeezed Serena's arm. "There he is! He's looking this way."

For one glorious moment when she turned around, Serena expected to see Philip standing there outside the barrier. It was Gabrio, the elderly sailor who had become infatuated with Thetis. Serena concealed the shock of her disappointment as best she could. "That's a good sign. The gods may be with you."

Thetis squinted, ruffling up her flawless forehead. "Do you believe in the gods?"

"I believe in the goodness of one special goddess."

"Venus? She's my favorite. She understands people's weaknesses. Does yours?"

Serena laughed shortly. "Judging by what I have experienced recently, I suspect my goddess has a strong sense of Roman justice." She saw the beginnings of the other girl's disbelieving smile and said flatly, "We Romans believe in justice. More than any of these other countries you see represented here. What we don't have is mercy. But you won't find that among those non-Romans either. I hope our gods are more merciful than we are." She had considered her fate, the chance of becoming a slave prostituted to some strange man who bought her, and was remembering the Roman heroine Lucretia. There were circumstances, she decided, looking around her, when her goddess would understand suicide.

But before she came to that, Serena determined to try all other tricks, including flight. She and Thetis were not shackled together. The hemp cords had been removed when both women proved docile. It was one of those small victories Serena had counted on when she knew there could be no possible escape while at sea or during the heavily guarded trip to the prison cubicles for slaves at Brundisium.

Now, with the sun high, and a March wind sweeping across the open auction platform, rattling the awning overhead, the mob of buyers began to close into the square around the wooden platform where a bearded Greek was gesticulating, giving orders. A discomfiting number of buyers moved slowly by the slave pens on their way to the foot of the platform, and Serena didn't like the way they looked at her, or their sly winks and grins as they saw that she had noticed them. She turned hurriedly to watch the distant Greek auctioneer, who had started to speak.

He went on, ". . . the household of the assassin Publius C. Graecia. Bring them forward. First, the female body slaves on the right. The male slaves on the left for your personal perusal. Hairdressers, secretaries, pedagogues, butlers, stewards. . . . Bring them forward, one at a time." With sweeping, graceful gestures he indicated various spots on the platform, and aided by two assistants who wore the robes and hair bindings of traders from the great Delos slave markets, he pulled the prettiest males and females near the center,

where even merchants and travelers on their way to the docks could glimpse these prize displays.

The women were not chained, nor were they bound in any way. Serena studied the far edges of the sale platform, the crowd milling about, now pushing closer, urged forward by newcomers joining the prospective buyers. Torches flared at the four corners of the platform to help attract and provide a dramatic frame for the sale, but they were too high for Serena to reach them. She had some notion of providing a distraction during which she might run away. She had no idea of where she would go afterward, how she would get to Rome, but some way must appear. Good Vesta would provide a method. Surely it wasn't Vesta's will that she should become the physical property of one of these evil-looking strangers.

Already, the first bidding had begun. A young Egyptian hairdresser, tall and slim as a Nile reed, was stripped naked before the crowd, her gown fallen to her bare feet. Her small-breasted, flat-bellied body was a deep olive color. The golden flesh had almost a greenish cast. The triangle of pubic hair was blue-black like the strange, straight hair that framed her exotic face. Bidders in the crowd naturally found this pelvic region erotic, called out lewd descriptions, comments that brought a flush to Serena's face as she heard. But the Egyptian merely grinned, her painted red lips spread wide as she seemed to offer herself as the prize to each bidder. She laughed as the bids on her rose toward three thousand sestertes and would go much higher. A fat butler representing a local knight's household was bidding against an Arab horse trader. Serena wondered in passing what the horse trader would do with a fragile hairdresser, but her real thoughts were still on an escape attempt. Never could she herself endure such shame as the Egyptian gloried in, she told herself.

Was it possible to get away in the confusion when she and Thetis were removed from this slave pen? There had been considerable confusion when the Graecia household was removed. But then, that had involved more than thirty slaves at once, out of the entire batch of four hundred that belonged to the dead assassin. Thirty slaves could cause a good deal more confusion than one woman whose previous life had been confined to good works and household chores. She moved closer to the gate under cover of the flirtatious pantomime between Thetis and the old sailor from the trireme.

As Serena reached the low fence of wooden stakes, the street beyond the slave market was momentarily cleared by several soldiers preceding an elegant litter. No doubt a senator's wife, Serena thought, and then saw two Praetorian guards in all their glittering splendor, and she knew that the woman in the litter must be one of the two empresses. It was obvious to her which empress this would be.

The litter was set down close by the fence. Serena started to back away, but seeing the guards glance at her, attracted by her sudden movement, she stopped. The litter curtains parted. Without the help of her body slave the Empress Agrippina stepped out. She had never looked more regal, more resplendent in royal purple mourning, set off by amethyst jewelry inlaid in silver. She looked around briefly at the penned slaves.

Serena was grateful for the wretched dyed black hair that she wore so long it concealed a good part of her face, throat, and breasts. She tried to stand the way these sensuous companions of hers stood, in a way less proud than provocative, to display their best wares, the best points of their figures, tiny waists, the curve of enticing hips, the tilted, enticing globular breasts. But it was against her nature, and Serena had a secret notion that her carriage was too proud, her lips too tight and hard.

Agrippina's eyes flickered over the merchandise; then she turned away and within Serena's hearing asked the nearest Praetorian, "Have you heard yet from your prefect? Is he still in Rome?"

Serena's attention was captured.

"It is not yet known, Empress. He had business with a senator in Rome. That same Cato who made trouble over the vestal Damaris."

"Did he visit the Vestals' House?"

"No, Empress. But . . ."

"Well?" Her sandaled feet began to tap impatiently. She was more than impatient. To Serena she appeared nervous and pale now that they were discussing Philip.

"The Lady Maxima met with Senator Cato at his city mansion almost immediately after the prefect's arrival. The senator himself greeted the lady and her maid."

"*Is he still in Rome?*" Her low-pitched voice was formidable. Serena could well imagine its effect on the Praetorian, who was confused by the question.

"The . . . the senator?"

"No, you fool! The prefect."

"Begging your Majesty's pardon, my men never saw the prefect afterward. He must still be there. It's hard to find men I can trust to spy on him. He's got most of the Praetorians either admiring him or in terror of him. They may betray our . . . surveillance to him. We did learn one thing. They mentioned Admiral Anicetus several times. But the Admiral's here in Brundisium."

The empress considered her fingernails, which had dug into her right palm. She winced, whether at his news or at the pain of those sharp nails. "Here in Brundisium. And Anicetus bears me no love. . . . Well, no matter. The prefect is bound to return to Brundisium. To escort Nero back to Rome, if for no other reason. Tell me, what of the missing vestal?"

"They claim she's not missing, Empress. Only ill. The body servant of the vestal Justitia insists it wasn't ever intended for the vestal Serena to go north with her maid. It's all a trick."

"So where is the vestal? Why can't this Justitia's maid find Lady Serena in the Vestals' House?"

Serena held her breath. The Praetorian shrugged.

Agrippina opened her hands, laced her fingers together again. Serena knew that the empress pictured Serena herself between those hands. After an uncomfortable silence Agrippina saw that everyone was looking at her. She laughed.

"Come. Help me buy a new reader, and possibly a new hairdresser."

Serena realized that with Philip still in Rome there could be no help for her today. Yet she felt warmed and blessed by the knowledge that the meeting between Lady Maxima, Cato, and Philip must have concerned her. If she could escape from this slave market, at least, those she loved would be waiting for her! True, the presence of Agrippina would make it doubly dangerous, since the last thing Serena could afford to do was call the empress's attention to herself.

Seeing that he now had the attention of the august new arrival, the slave dealer put everything he had into his dramatic auctioneering. Unfortunately, the slim Egyptian hairdresser had been sold by this time. She picked up her curious, tube-like gown, wriggled her olive-skinned body into it, entirely undisturbed by the lascivious lip-smacking of the men present, and went off in haughty content with the knight's butler. The

dealer hastily called for other hairdressers in the slave pen to be brought forward.

Travelers bound for Greece stopped around Agrippina's litter, curious to see what occupied the attention of the woman who still ruled Italy in the absence of her son. A wine cart drawn by oxen lumbered by. The carter stood up to see what was going on, and becoming interested in the merchandise, including an attractive blond female up for sale, he swung off the cart and tried to get closer to the gold-skinned offering. He slipped on a broken paving stone, caught himself, and pushed onward, hoping to get an even better look at all that flesh.

Blotting out her horror of displaying herself on the platform, Serena concentrated on the carter's fall, the sight of those broken stones and pebbles, and what might be done with them. She watched the two oxen acting less patient than they were popularly supposed to be, perhaps because the carter had left them near two twittering middle-aged women and their ancient male escort, all three of whom were clearly made uneasy by the heavy animals.

Serena made a fine pretense of twisting her foot on the broken stones inside the slave pen. She knelt to massage her ankle, and dropped the dirty scarf from her shoulders. While doing so, she picked up a handful of pebbles and a bit of sharp broken paving stone which felt like a nasty weapon inside the scarf bundled in her right hand. Now, if only she could pass close to the oxen, while being herded to the platform, close enough to upset the animals with either the pebbles or the bit of paving stone!

Agrippina made minute signals with her fingers to the Praetorian who had given her news of Philip, and he called her bids. She bought the male reader, waved aside blond beauties, and decided she wanted a girl who might be trained for a personal attendant.

The slave dealer looked out over the crowded slave pen, made gestures, spoke quietly to one of his aides, and the Delian went to the fence, looking over the merchandise.

"You. And you. You . . ." to Thetis. "And the redhead. And . . ." He looked hard at Serena. "Yes. The brunette. Bring them out."

The other Delian pointed out something to him. Though he had obviously forgotten, he now reminded the Greek slave

dealer, "The last two, the blond and the brunette, are to be sold for the benefit of the Naval Wounded Fund."

The Greek nodded. Serena found herself being pushed along behind the other and more presentable candidates for the post of attendant to the Empress Agrippina. She dragged, became awkward, and several times appeared to turn the flat sole of her sandal on an uneven paving stone. Ahead of her, just before the females were helped up onto the platform, each woman's single garment was torn off and let fall to her feet. None of the women slaves showed any shock or modesty when they were thus presented, their flesh often pale as milk and strongly needing a little sun.

Serena was learning something she had never known before, that the innocence and modesty were the first qualities shed when these human beings became chattels. She began to pray frantically that something would happen, a volcanic eruption, an earthquake, the end of the world. Anything to prevent such a public display of her own body.

Thetis was pulled forward. Like Serena, she wore a shift beneath her gown. When the latter was jerked off, she screamed and cried, "Ouch!" apparently when he pinched her by accident. At this shrill cry the oxen jerked against their harness and pushed into the watchers nearby, who gave little yelps of alarm. Serena noted this and every detail for her own purposes.

The gown dropped around Thetis' ankles. There was a general groan from the cheated males present. They saw the linen shift covering her body from her breasts to her groin. Teasingly, to arouse their erotic tastes, the Greek slave dealer pretended to struggle with the top of the shift, fingering it, tugging, and at last producing Thetis' full, impressive breasts, one at a time, a sight which aroused fresh bidding, some of it in voices hoarse with desire.

The Delian reached for Serena's arm to jerk her forward. The bidding on Thetis proceeded, with the girl now suitably naked so that the buyer could not claim later that any physical blemish had been concealed. Agrippina motioned for the Praetorian to disregard Thetis, and Serena was brought toward the foot of the platform, her reluctant feet dragging over the ground.

Agrippina narrowed her eyes against the sunlight, and after looking at her with what was for Serena a heart-stopping in-

tentness, said, "A filthy creature. But put her up next. When she is thoroughly scrubbed, she may be useful."

The Delian slaver reached for the neck of Serena's gown, tugging hard. As if he had pinched her flesh, Serena shrieked, "Ouch!" in Thetis' manner, then cowered away from him as if to avoid further hurt. As she did so, she hurled the pebbles and sharp piece of stone at the nearest ox. While the slaver pulled on her gown to uncover her breasts and shift, she saw with a sick despair that her rain of stones had struck the two skittish women and the old man instead of the animals. Startled by this peppering of stones, however, the old man lost his footing, fell into the flank of the ox, and his companions screamed.

Pandemonium reigned as the oxen stampeded under this new assault of noise, dragging the cart forward so that the wine amphorae rolled out over the rough paving stones. The yells of those in the path of the panicked oxen further confused the beasts. Half the buyers around the platform rushed to steal the heavy wine jars rolling around free for the taking.

Serena, who had been praying for such a moment, snatched at the neck of her gown, pulled it up to cover her breasts, and ran into the crowd, kneeing, shoving, pushing, and kicking while the two astonished Delian slavers tried to keep a tight command over the score of other slaves waiting their turn below the platform.

Serena was on the outskirts of the crowd before any of the slavers started after her. As she passed the various townspeople hurrying in the opposite direction to see what had happened, she explained her own haste and disheveled condition by the breathless cry, "The animals have broken loose!"

This compounded the panic, turning the townspeople around into another mass exodus, each of them sure that a cage of lions or tigers headed for the arena had overturned.

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Presently, she found herself among the crowds in the square that marked the end of the much-traveled Appian Way from Rome to Brundisium. She looked down at herself, aware of the disreputable sight she presented. She knew now that the buyers at the slave market had seen her naked to the waist, a nightmare she determined to banish by her deep, prayerful thanks to Vesta that they had seen no more.

While she ran, she gave thought to the importance of her appearance. She had been determining her course of action and how to carry it out. She must look as nearly as possible like a messenger legitimately sent to see her one hope in the town, Admiral Anicetus. Serena was fairly sure the admiral would listen no matter what she looked like, if she mentioned Philip, perhaps as a former owner. It was getting past the servants that would be the problem. In her experience servants always stood more on dignity than their masters did.

The Delian slaver had torn the strap of her gown at the shoulder seam. It was easy enough to knot the two straps together. She still had the dirty scarf which had once belonged to Captain Glaucus' wife, the luckless Niobe. Serena took this, bundled all her hair under it, and tied the scarf around her head, with the faded ends resting on her throat to the left of her chin. When she saw her reflection rippling in a street fountain, she could hardly recognize it. She hoped this would be true of the slave dealers.

Sailors and merchants crowded up and down the street leading to the docks. Shivering and constantly looking over her shoulder for pursuers, Serena let two merchant sailors go by until she saw a young marine obviously off a war galley. She went up to him.

"Excellency, I have important news for Admiral Anicetus. Where will I find him?"

The young man looked her over. He was friendly, obvi-

ously interested in what he saw, and in other circumstances would have been likable. "What's so good about old Anicetus? Wouldn't I do?"

She ignored the implication. "No. I'm ordered to speak to the admiral personally." Greatly daring, she added, "It involves the emperor."

The young marine's expression sobered. "So that's it. They said he'd be landing anytime. But why the secrecy? All right. I'll take you to the old . . . to the admiral's house. Come along. It's quite a walk. Clear to the other end of town."

It couldn't have been better. In his company she was less likely to fit the description of a half-naked slave girl escaping alone from the auction block. Her normal long-legged stride was useful now as the two of them crossed the open forum and headed along a narrow street whose enclosing walls gave no hint of the rich patrician household within. The young marine asked Serena several questions about her report to the admiral, but she avoided them, pantomiming that she was out of breath and saving all her energy for the meeting with Admiral Anicetus.

It was already past noon, the sixth hour of the day, when they reached a kitchen entrance to the admiral's house. The admiral's cook, himself an elderly Macedonian ranking high in the hierarchy of slaves, opened the door, informed them in a surly gesture, "Be off! Go around to the garden gate if you've business with his Excellency. He may have time. I don't!"

The marine stuck his laced boot in the doorway. "There's no time. We've got to see the admiral. Open the door."

A rangy, elegant man behind the cook came forward. "I am his Excellency's butler. Impossible to see him now. He has an official visitor. Go around the block. The doorkeeper will let you wait in the atrium."

With a sailor's annoyance at petty land obstructions, the marine elbowed aside the cook and the butler, ignoring the cook's ferociously wielded soup ladle. Serena quickly followed him past the long brick hearth, the copper kettles steaming in use, and a half-dozen slaves who stood by, open-mouthed at this lese majesty to the all-powerful cook.

The cook's complaints faded behind the intruders, but the butler tried to get in front of Serena and the marine, moving as rapidly as his long, narrow skirts would permit.

"The admiral's visitor is on the point of departure. I will

announce you," he insisted, to preserve what remained of his dignity.

They had passed through the dining chamber with its dull red murals. As they reached the peristyle and an adjoining garden, the marine glanced at Serena and shrugged.

"Not me. It's not my problem." He laughed at the butler's confusion. "What name do you give, girl?"

Serena knew that she would have to tell a part truth to the admiral, but she kept to the phrase that had worked with the marine.

"His Excellency won't know my name. Tell him it is confidential and concerns the emperor."

The butler yielded gracefully, gestured for them to remain in the garden. "I will give him your message. He has been in conference on a confidential matter. As soon as his visitor is gone, I will ask if the . . . er . . . female may speak to him." He looked her over from head to foot, then left them.

The marine winked at Serena. "He was wondering if you had a weapon on you. Anybody could see you've nothing to hide."

Serena felt her cheeks redden with embarrassment, but knew his remark was physically accurate. Her thin gown was in disgraceful condition, but even worse, in spite of all her attempts to wash herself with the drinking water given her, the generous amount of flesh she displayed was dirty, some of it even stained from her hair dye. Considering this optimistically, she decided that her disreputable appearance worked in her favor. Admiral Anicetus would never believe a vestal virgin was so disgustingly dirt-stained.

In his good-natured way the marine tried to make conversation, but Serena was too nervous to concentrate. When the butler returned, the young marine asked, "Will you be all right?"

It occurred to her somewhat late in their acquaintance that if the admiral failed her, this young man might help her reach Rome, but already he was heading out the garden gate. Having gotten nowhere with the pretty fugitive, he was anxious to be on his way.

"Yes. Thank you very much."

She looked after him a trifle wistfully. It had been good to count upon his help during the last half-hour.

"This way," the butler said, adding, "You will walk behind

me. You will not speak until you are given permission by his Excellency."

Serena followed obediently. The closer she came to facing that stern-faced Admiral Anicetus, the more she began to doubt herself or his desire to save her, even if she did mention the name of his friend Philip Tigellinus. Maybe it would have been better just to start out on the Appian Way, hoping some countryman with a cart would make the long journey to Rome carrying her among his cargo.

The admiral had walked to the marble vestibule, where he gave his military visitor a farewell salute. He turned now to stroll the length of the atrium, past the shallow pool of exotic multi-colored fish and toward Serena. She saw the hawk face and worried over its severity, but was surprised to find him chuckling. Half to himself, half to his butler, he remarked, "I wish I could help him. I've never seen him so wild, but he's a good fellow. The way that rogue handles a quadriga, it's too bad he ever left the Circus Maximus. I could always count on winning a thousand sesterces on him before he got ambitious. . . . What's this? You're in the wrong part of the house, girl. Crito, take her to the kitchen and feed her."

"Excellency," she began quickly, before the butler could interfere, "I must speak to you in private about the emperor and . . . and the Praetorian prefect."

"What!" The admiral stared and chuckled again. "What about the emperor and the prefect? Crito, you may go."

The butler left unwillingly, looking back over his shoulder. The admiral waited until his servant had crossed the garden to the slave quarters. "Terrible gossip, that Crito. And of course, he considers himself my superior in every way. Probably is. Now, tell me at once. Have you a message for my friend Philip Tigellinus?"

"Yes, Excellency. I've been ordered to reach him in Rome as rapidly as possible. But"—she took a quick breath—"it's got to be secret. There is a lady—a highborn lady here in Brundisium—who must not know about it."

Almost before she finished, he held up his hand. "Say no more. That particular lady probably has spies here in my own house. I know she has them planted in my villa at naval headquarters in Misenum. Now, hurry. What is your message?"

This was difficult in a way she hadn't imagined. The admi-

ral was being kind and she could only ask him, "Forgive me, Excellency. It is for the prefect. A personal matter."

He looked her over. "Aren't you the slave girl from that smuggling bireme? Did you have this information then? Why didn't you tell me? Philip has his own problems now, some business he's being mighty secretive about. I've never seen him in such a fury." He moved away from Serena, turning slowly toward the vestibule. "But if you think your news is important enough, I'll call him back."

The business appointment the admiral had mentioned. The "rogue" who handled a four-horse chariot in the Circus Maximus....

Serena began to run. She passed the astonished admiral, opened the door, and rushed out onto the paving stones in front of the house. It was mid-day and the narrow street looked deserted except down at the corner of a wider cross street where the Praetorian prefect's trusted groom had turned over the fiery black team to Philip. And the tall man in the red-plumed helmet could only be Philip Tigellinus, who had taken the reins from the groom and stepped up into the light gilded chariot. He was within a second or two of giving the starting signal to the team when Serena called to him. She was still running, breathless, and had to cry his name several times, beginning discreetly with his title:

"Excellency! . . . Prefect! . . ." And finally the desperate: "Philip!"

Her first cry had stopped him. He said something impatient to the groom. But she saw that her second cry and then his name had reacted violently upon him. He threw the reins to the groom, leaped to the cobblestones, and swung around. If she had ever doubted his love, that doubt was gone. He stood petrified for several seconds, staring at her, his dark eyes looking wide and almost unbearably dear to her.

He seemed to have aged in the months since their parting at Baiae. The harsh lines in his face were accentuated, but as she ran to him she marveled that he had recognized her through all her dirt, her covered hair, and the torn gown that disgraced the lowliest slave. He came out of his trance and started toward her on a run. She noticed that he still limped, but this in no way seemed to impede him. He reached her with his arms open wide and crushed her into a warm, painful embrace, his military cloak smothering her as well.

In the euphoria of her happiness she began to laugh at the

absurdity of blind love. He was too obsessed to note her odd reaction as she tried to breathe.

"My darling . . . my lovely . . . lovely darling . . ." he murmured hoarsely, proving that love was blind. "I've been over half of Italy—I crossed Greece in a day. I got to Rome and found that those idiots Cato and the vestal had sent you off on some damned galley. I came back here to intercept the fool ship. I thought Anticetus could help me get to the *Pericles*. He said . . . Well, I described you in a general way. He had no idea who you were. But no one like you had been found on the *Pericles*, he said. . . . My poor darling. . . ."

They kissed again and again. His lips touched her eyes, her forehead, her cheeks, and she responded as wildly. They behaved with a delirious joy that they themselves laughed at. Then their mouths met hungrily and they poured into that kiss all the sexual longings of the weeks they had been apart. A kiss that explored and conquered and was conquered by the other's mouth. Momentarily drained, they stood there in the street, with Serena drawn close to his body, her lips soft against the hard column of his throat, while over her head he frowned at his groom who sought to interrupt them.

"But, Excellency," the man protested, "you wanted to avoid the empress—I mean the lady. This is a pretty public place."

That shook Serena. She whispered to Philip in panic, "She mustn't see me. She is my enemy. I had to avoid her until the emperor returns. That's why I look so horrible."

"Not horrible to me, *carissima*. But here. I'll cover you with my cape, in case anyone from the *Pericles* sees us." Philip boosted Serena onto the chariot car, then got up behind her, imprisoning her between his arms, which held the reins. She hardly knew what was happening to her, and in any case would have made no objections. So many horrors had occurred since the beginning of Serena's flight that finding Philip now seemed a supreme proof of Vesta's blessing upon her.

The groom suggested, "Best give her my cap and cape, Excellency. That way, any that see you, may think she's your groom."

"A good thought. Thanks."

The groom fitted the laced leather cap down over Serena's head while Philip wrapped the heavy brown short cloak around her shoulders, hugging her to him briefly.

The groom called, "Better not let the barracks here know we're back. I'll commandeer a horse and follow you. No time to lose, Excellency. We don't want that Medusa on our tails."

Serena agreed eagerly, but there was enormous comfort in Philip's arms, and when he gave the four fretting horses the signal to start, she felt at this minute that her luck and Philip's had changed, that there might be a future for them after all. It was almost worth the horrors of past weeks to find herself once more with him and to know that his love for her had never changed.

Hearing another male voice behind them as the quadriga turned out of the narrow street, Serena looked back, over Philip's left arm. She saw Admiral Anicetus talking heatedly to Philip's groom, obviously demanding an explanation. Philip heard, and taking the reins in one hand, waved the other above his head without glancing back. Serena was relieved to see the admiral raise his own arm in salute.

As she and Philip passed the city walls and moved out into a dry, desolate countryside, Philip began to let the team out, giving the four their heads. Soon they were racing along the great highway that would eventually lead up to Rome.

Serena thought in other circumstances it would be easy to become seasick as the light chariot bounced over a highway so well-traveled it was eternally under repair. She held onto the roughened metal edges of the chariot until her fingers were raw, concentrating on the knowledge that Philip loved her and that—just possibly—they might both be saved from Agrippina's wrath. She didn't know how, but Philip seemed confident.

Darkness came on, but they avoided the next walled town of some size, and Serena began to steel her tired, rattled bones to ride all night. Philip, however, seemed to be watching for some sign by the side of the highway. In the middle of the moonlit evening they took a detour off the great Appian Way and drew up beside an obscure little village surrounded by wheat fields and early-spring flowers. Tethered beside a barn on the outskirts of the village was a mare being rubbed down by a sweating man who looked up with a flip salute at Philip.

Serena was worried by this recognition, but Philip reassured her. "Agas is one of my men. It's handy to have these havens and extra mounts when I need them. Agas, how goes it?"

The stocky, gray-haired veteran made a dash for the team, got them under control as Philip lifted Serena down, and managed to say, "All's well on this road so far, Excellency."

"Good. Agas, this is my groom. We'll rest and eat there in the shed next to the barn. Is there anyone here who knows my usual groom by sight?"

"No, Excellency. An old woman named Ziva runs the place as a relay for travelers, but since they finished laying new blocks on the Appian Way last month hardly anybody's been through here. Ziva's practically blind, though she won't admit it. I'll take care of the team and then get you something to eat." He gave Serena a curious glance but wasn't interested enough to stare. If he recognized that she was a female, Serena could imagine his thoughts: the prefect's taste in women was pretty low if he had to resort to this dirty creature.

"Now, then, these are the plans I discussed with the senator and Lady Maxima," Philip announced when he and Serena had dropped tiredly upon piles of straw in the shed. He stacked straw behind her. She brushed it aside.

"Philip, I must know what is to happen. I'll be taken to the Tullianum, and then . . . Did they tell you how Damaris died?"

He took her hands, held them tightly. "*Carissima*, that unfortunate child was found guilty of a religious crime. Claudia Acté told me in Greece that you would be accused of poisoning Britannicus." She started to speak, but he raised her hand, the gesture silencing her. "A preposterous charge. Cato tells me he can prove you are innocent. But it gives Agrippina a chance to interfere. It's even possible she can condemn you if she moves fast enough."

"Then if I return to Rome, I am lost."

"No, my love. Nero knows why I returned. He gave me his word he would be embarking for Italy at once. Between Acté and Poppaea Sabina, they will see to it. He should be less than a week behind me."

"Poppaea Sabina? Why would she help us?"

"Not *us*. Not even you. Our ambitious friend Poppaea is happier in Rome. She doesn't shine as well in the provinces."

Serena freed her hands with difficulty, pressed them against her tired head. "But if he doesn't arrive!"

He explained patiently. "The emperor will arrive in time to hear the evidence against you. And for you. You will be free

to return to the Vestals' House. Or . . . there is an alternative."

She studied his face thoughtfully. "I don't think I want to listen."

"Hear me out." The glint in his eyes, the set of his jaw, showed her signs of the ruthless police official that the world feared. "You don't return to Rome. The vestal Serena vanishes. Troubled in mind, she ran away from the Vestals' House. Eventually, a body will be identified as that of the missing vestal."

"What body?"

He stared at her, beginning to understand that he had ventured onto ground which was even more distasteful than the trial awaiting her.

"My darling, I don't intend to drown some helpless female. What do you think me capable of? I only meant some dead woman would be identified as the vestal Serena. And you and I could marry in some other country. Spain or Gaul. Or the Near East. I'll ask Nero to send me abroad. Prefect. Something of the sort. We can be married within a year." He raised his voice, laughed as if hoping the contagion would reach her, but he was not his confident self. He was pleading. "A year? No! Months. Darling, you still want to marry me, don't you? If we have to wait, I'll be a weak old man."

She smiled at that. "You won't ever be weak. Or old."

"Can't you see me hobbling about with a crutch, squinting out of half-blind eyes in order to see my newborn son?"

This was irresistible and she threw herself into his open arms. They lay there together for a few minutes in silence, dreaming. She could feel his heavy heartbeat through the black-and-silver tunic he wore, and she was stirred to excitement by the nearness of his powerful bare thighs, that body whose strength he offered to her.

"Can you picture a life like this forever?" he prompted while her desires quarreled with her conscience and her intelligence. The training of over twenty years won out.

"Running away forever?" she asked faintly. "Dirty and disheveled, my hair dyed black, my face a mask, so no one would know me? Darling Philip, you would become ashamed of me in a month. And I would despise myself."

Without looking at her, he denied angrily, "I love you now. I loved you through what you call dirt. Do you think I am a liar? That I don't really want you?"

He turned suddenly, caught her to him with as much anger as sexual desire. His eyes were hard, and she was afraid it would be disastrous to their love if he took her in this mood.

Before a struggle that she couldn't possibly win, she tried to make him understand.

"I can't give myself to you until I am free. Please, Philip. We need only wait a short time. The emperor will help us. Don't you understand at all? I sinned against my vows, but the goddess saved me. I wouldn't dishonor my vows again."

"Your goddess forgave you before. She will forgive you again." His fingers seemed to mold her body to his, as if her flesh were clay for his use. His hands made deliberate examination of all the secret places of her body, and though she struggled, she trembled with wanting him. His lips found the violent pulses and roused them with sensuous kisses. When she cried out, one of his hands closed over her mouth, and at that instant he entered her body, a harsh invader.

She had a ghastly, swift memory of the sailor on shipboard. Then the rhythm of her own body moved with his, and she knew this was the culmination of all her hopes and prayers since their parting. She and Philip belonged together as surely as their bodies moved together to a climax now, with a shared passion.

Afterward, he surprised her by his tenderness. His fingers pushed threads of the dirty black hair out of her eyes. His voice soothed her gently: "Don't cry, *carissima*. If you do, I'll have to kiss those lovely eyes, and then we'll both be aroused and sinning again."

"Don't joke." But she couldn't help smiling.

By the time Agas, the veteran legionary, knocked on the shed's old warped door, Serena had pulled herself together and Philip was able to say in a brisk, soldierly voice, "Come in. Come in. Don't stand on ceremony."

It was not Agas who entered, but the prefect's groom, who had followed them from Brundisium. One look at his tense body, with the dust creased in the sweating wrinkles of his face, and they knew the news was bad.

"Excellency, the empress is on her way to Rome. I passed her procession. She means to prove a certain lady is not sick in the Vestals' House as the senior vestal claims. If so, it means the empress will have the Lady Maxima's life for conspiracy to hide a suspected murderer."

Sérena got to her feet, crying frantically, "But it isn't true! She is innocent."

Philip said, "Hush! That can wait. How did Agrippina discover this?"

"An old slave belonging to one of the vestals. She slipped the story to one of Agrippina's spies, and he dashed off to Brundisium like the foul-tongued dog he was."

Philip looked at Serena. She whispered, "Lady Justitia's slave, the Thracian. She always hated Damaris and me."

Serena tried to match the calm the men showed. "I've got to reach Rome before the empress does. She will find me stretched out in a locked room at the house. With marsh fever." She grimaced as she felt her hair. "And my hair must be its natural color. Philip! We've no time at all."

He said nothing. He saw that no argument would move her where Lady Maxima's life was at stake. He took her arm, and they left the little shed where for a brief, violent time they had known the passion of love. The passion of hate waited for them in Rome.

# 31

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As the groom and Agas harnessed the four horses to the little chariot, Philip ran his hand over the withers and then the flanks of the left tracemate. "Poor lad. You've hardly done sweating out the first race, and here we are on the second. You'll keep Lycon and the others to the track, won't you?"

"Lycon?" Serena repeated, aware of a painful stab of guilt. During these last few hours she had forgotten her kind friend Lycon who had loved her and died for her.

"Lycon is the left yokemate. You see this horse on the outside is tracemate, and that . . ." He laughed. "Never mind." He lifted her into the chariot, and laughed again at Serena in the brown cape and tight-fitting leather cap that covered her ears as well and gave her a boyish look. He might be amused at her looks, but she suspected his good humor was for her benefit, to keep her from worrying about the journey ahead. If she allowed herself to do so, she could still feel every sensation of their physical union. She knew her struggle had been against herself, not against Philip.

Someday, long before she was thirty, if the gods willed it, they would marry, as Philip wished. Now there was Lady Maxima's life at stake, and her own trial. And whatever Philip believed about the emperor's plan, she herself had no doubt that her own life depended upon Nero's travel plans; in fact, upon Nero's whim. But one thing at a time. She and Philip must reach Rome before Agrippina arrived. That was the first priority.

They had eaten a brief meal while the team was being fed and rested. Since all of the day's bread was gone by this hour of the night, Serena struggled to get some nourishment out of the little slab of cold, greasy kid she had received, but like most Romans and all of Rome's mighty legions, she much preferred bread to meat. A cup of posca was strong and sour enough to give her renewed vigor for a few hours, and when

she and Philip started off again they were optimistic. Philip spoke for both of them when he told Titus, his groom, who would ride ahead, "We'll win this one, Titus. It's a deal more important than the Parilia Games."

"Where you broke the circus record," Titus reminded him. "But I'll try to keep ahead of you. Clear the way, as you might say. Good luck, Excellency." He slapped the haunches of the nearest stallion. While Serena fastened her sore palms and fingers around the chariot rail, Philip got up behind her, secured her in her place between his arms as he signaled over the reins, and the four blacks sprang forward.

Serena was badly shaken, as much by the working of the hard muscles in his arms as by the rattle and leap of the chariot beneath her feet. But after these many hours of riding, Serena had finally begun to get her "sea legs," to learn balance and a certain ease, the ability to let her body move with the wild careening of the little car. Thanks to the meat, some goat cheese, and especially the posca, she was able to make up mental jokes about her new ability to race against Philip in the Circus Maximus.

She was too excited to feel tired or frightened for some time, but a little before dawn, having stopped once to water and rest the horses, they reached an imperial post house where teams were kept ready for any officer on the emperor's business.

Titus had reached the post house first on a winded horse, and came to warn them, "The fewer that see you lady, the better. I told 'em we were breaking in a new groom, a slave boy. But leave it at that, Excellency."

Serena agreed. She was desperately tired and felt that a rest anywhere, even curled up in the chariot, would help. On the other hand, she was terrified of any delay in reaching Rome. "Don't let anyone see me. He's right. They might associate me later with my real office in Rome."

Philip considered her. He took her hand gently, examined it, and kissed the cut and bleeding palm. Then he made a decision.

"Titus, do you think you can get me a cart and fast horses?"

"Easy enough. But they've got a four-horse team ready to put to your chariot."

"Never mind. We'll send someone back for the quadriga in a few days. Meanwhile, I want a cart in which she can rest. But I want fast horses."

Titus shook his head, muttering, "I'd never give up the reins of a chariot for a common cart. However . . ." He went into the post house.

Philip raised Serena's chin, smiled at her dusty, dirty countenance with all her lovely hair covered.

"Sweetheart, I've never lost a race in fifteen years, and I won't lose this. So I want you to rest in that cart and try not to worry. All I ask is one promise from you."

"Anything." She hesitated, added apologetically, "Except one, darling."

He placed his forefinger across her lips. "I know. But Nero can free you of your vows to Vesta for reasons of health. It will take mouths, but"—he removed his fingers and kissed her lips—"if I have your promise to accept your freedom, I can wait those months."

A year ago she might have been unable to give such a promise. Perhaps even three months ago. But twenty years of her life had been devoted to Vesta, and she knew that there was another life, a feminine, natural life, that she wanted now. In spite of his forcible taking of her body a few hours ago, she was honest enough to realize that she could never be complete again without his physical love.

"Dear Vesta, surely twenty years is long enough to serve you alone," she murmured, then saw his expression lighten, and laughed. "I promise."

In spite of all her aches and pains, in spite of the fact that every bone in her body felt disjointed from every other bone, Serena was able to curl up in the back of a cart and go to sleep. This was due in part to the straw produced by Titus, and the cloak that Philip wrapped tight around her, but she also owed her new serenity to her new knowledge of herself.

Nor did this confidence in the future begin to lag, until the days and nights of rapid travel by any means possible to them brought the three within a long day's journey of Rome. She never quite understood how Philip and his groom could rouse themselves after three or four hours' sleep, take the reins, and begin another wild plunge onward. Philip laid it to his early training, during the days when he rode to victory in several bloody, death-dealing chariot races within a single day in the circus. Whatever the reason, he still seemed in magnificent physical condition, performing this difficult, often painful journey with what was to Serena, incredible ease.

One cloudy April afternoon as they stopped to change

horses only an hour outside the gates of Rome, Philip caught Serena stifling a yawn. He reminded her cheerfully, "By sunset you should be safely in your bed, *carissima*. I wish I might be with you."

He succeeded in making her laugh, as he had intended, but she reminded him, "Not before I bathe. And not, I'm afraid, before late evening. You forget the law for wheeled traffic in daylight."

He reached over, as if to pinch her nose, and she ducked, but he had the last word. "And you forget, that law doesn't apply to the Praetorian prefect."

She accepted the correction gaily, with the teasing remark, "Isn't it lucky I am traveling in such distinguished company?"

Titus crushed her mood, however, when he came loping across the ground, breathing hard, to give them news of danger. "There's two legionaries inside the tavern. They've been with the Empress Agrippina's carriage. She's about a day behind us. She sent them ahead to delay you, Excellency, by any means short of killing you."

Though the news was alarming, Serena had sense enough to remain silent, leaving the solution to Philip, who remarked dryly, "Any means short of death? I hadn't suspected Agrippina was such a compassionate woman. Do they know we are out here?"

"Think I'm crazy? Excuse me, Excellency, but I never rattle on in these places without knowing if they're the empress' friends or ours. We've got to borrow the quadriga that brought these fellows. It's the fastest thing around. They've got a new team ready for harness the minute they settle with you." He gave Serena the barest glance. "They know nothing about your new . . . groom."

"Obliging of them to have a team ready. I'll take it. It will be good to get back to a chariot again." Philip rubbed his hands together enthusiastically and explained to Serena, "Agrippina must be afraid they can't handle the arrest in Rome without her presence. Let her come. But now I know the gods are with us. We'll all be better for it, once I get the lines of a fresh four-horse team in my hands."

Serena tried valiantly to borrow his enthusiasm, but only the thought of Philip being attacked, delayed, and possibly killed by Agrippina's two legionaries made this mode of travel welcome after her previous experience in a racing chariot. At Philip's order she huddled in Titus' cape eating

the seeds of a big pomegranate that partly concealed her face from the tavern workers. Meanwhile, Philip and Titus got the legionaries' chariot out.

The harnessing was accomplished with skill and haste. No one in the tavern was aware that both team and chariot were being stolen. Serena stepped up into the chariot, held on for her life, and was joined by Philip.

Guessing her nervousness, he put his arms around her as usual, swinging the lines over her head and boasting playfully, "This time we'll break the record of the Parilia Races together."

Joking, she pretended to share his excitement, which she could see was genuine. "Well, all hail to us!"

"Let them go, Titus!" he ordered, his voice pitched low, but vibrant with his pleasure at the beginnings of a new race. "And try to keep up with us."

There was no disguising the sound of four mettlesome horses dragging a noisy chariot that rattled across the ground and out toward the busy Appian Way in the distance. Titus, riding a fast young mare beside the chariot, called to Philip, "The two legionaries haven't come out yet. But I can see the landlord. It'll be the legionaries next. He's already gone in to give them the bad news."

Philip flicked the lines above the backs of the team, and their speed increased. They were racing now, moving past the long lines of wheeled traffic drawn through the fields beyond the outer paving of the Appian Way. Drovers, charioeteers, and others with carts, carriages, and chariots, all awaiting the sunset hour, were either asleep in their wagons or rubbing down their animals, or taking bites out of big wheels of bread until such time as they were permitted into the city.

As a privileged vestal, Serena had been used to the parting of crowds for her to pass, but the power of the Praetorian prefect was awe-inspiring. All the litters borne by four to six slaves moved hastily aside. Pedestrians leaped out of the way, and to Serena's surprise, even the guards at the open arch of the Appian Way, having recognized Philip at sight, saluted without stopping him.

Philip must have known she was alarmed at the near-misses between the flying hooves of the four horses and hapless pedestrians on both sides. He pressed one hand on her shoulder, and she pretended to relax. He at least knew what he was doing. She was no longer afraid of being recognized in

the city. The juice of the pomegranate and some carelessly applied mud from the field around the tavern finished the disguise begun that day an age ago when Hagar and Lady Maxima turned her into a brunette slave girl.

Titus had dropped behind briefly, but made his way forward now, close enough to speak to Philip as the latter maneuvered between a senatorial litter and its indignant guards.

"Excellency, the legionaries have passed through the arch. . . . I can see them now."

"Get to the Vestals' House," Philip told him. "Have Lady Maxima send someone to me that she can trust, someone the size of my groom with his or her head covered. If he is stopped in front of the Vestals' House, well and good. We want Agrippina's guards to know who he is, so they won't stop him when he returns."

"Got it! I'm off!" And Titus urged his mount away from the foot of the Esquiline Hill, toward the old Forum.

Philip looked over his shoulder, scowled at the two horsemen rapidly covering the distance behind them, then sent his team forward, irrespective of screams of outrage from the citizenary who scattered in every direction before the hooves of the four horses. Badly shaken herself, Serena thought she had never seen so many shaking fists waved at Philip, who ignored them and kept to his course, racing through the street, abruptly curbing the team as he turned into a side street, two wheels bouncing over a crossing stone, and headed up the Esquiline toward Senator Cato's mansion. The street was so narrow that the crowds pressed hard against the high tenement walls as the chariot passed.

By the time Serena decided Philip was leading their pursuers direct to the senator's house, he had reined in the horses, and with exquisite skill on the lines, guided them around a pile of household furnishings that had been stranded in the middle of the street by a pair of rapidly fleeing movers. Minutes later Serena heard sounds of splintering wood, flying chunks of pottery, and the indignant shouts of the movers, who had rushed back to save their belongings just in time to be nearly run down by the two legionaries. The legionaries on horseback hadn't been able to avoid the obstacles in the street.

"That will keep them occupied," Philip observed with satisfaction as he pulled the team off the street into the stables behind Senator Cato's high-walled gardens. He hurried Serena

past the surprised grooms and stable slaves, who set about caring for the tired, foam-flecked animals. Serena saw that Cato's slave household obeyed Philip, apparently by previous arrangement. Serena found herself in Cato's garden, alone with Philip, who, contrary to her expectations, rushed her out a side door and into another street.

"What are we doing?" she asked while trying to catch her breath. "Shouldn't we wait for Titus to come with a vestal slave?"

"That luckless fellow Leander Pella was reading in the tablinum. I don't want him seeing us. As for Titus, he knows he is to come to my room, up the street. I used to sleep there when I wasn't spending the night at the barracks."

Or on the Palatine. But Serena didn't say this aloud. It might sound as if she was jealous of Agrippina, and she banished that thought immediately. With whirlwind energy he got her away from Cato's mansion and around a corner into a five-story series of flats built during the republic, before the Emperor Augustus began to enforce the fire and building laws. A family of equestrian grade occupied the ground floor, with a well-to-do freedman above. Philip's third-floor rooms were sparsely furnished, and Philip seemed to notice the dust for the first time. His apology only made Serena laugh over his concern at such a moment. But he assured her, "When I ask you to be my wife, *carissima*, I certainly expect to provide a villa in the country and a mansion in Rome for you. Not this hole."

"I don't need any of them, darling. I need you."

"All the same, you will have them. Now, rest for a few minutes." He drew her onto one of the hard cerule chairs. She was so tired her knees gave away, and she sat there looking up at him. She saw what few women of her class ever realized about these men who fought under the eagles of Rome. Had there ever before been men with the endurance, the immense physical power of a man like Philip Tigellinus? He had journeyed from Greece to Brundisium, and twice from Brundisium to Rome, using incredible physical effort. At the moment, his eyes still held the light of battle as he went to the high, tiny aperture in the street wall, pushed the dusty curtain aside, and looked out.

"Titus should be along any minute." He turned, studied Serena's tired face, which looked as drained as she felt. She knew he was trying to instill in her some of his own high en-

ergy, and she tried to respond to the gentleness of his manner. She suspected that it was only with her—and possibly long ago with Agrippina—that he revealed this tender side of his normally ruthless nature. "You are going to be freed at the trial, you know," he insisted. "Freed of those ridiculous charges. And then later, freed again. But we won't talk about that yet. . . . Smile, dearest. Just a little smile."

It was impossible to withstand that. She smiled, and he leaned over her chair and she touched his face with soft fingers.

When they heard Titus' heavy boots on the stairs, followed by a lighter step belonging to the slave from the Vestals' House, Philip and Serena looked at each other. In spite of their optimism, they had the same thought. This might be the last moment they would ever share alone. Her hands moved almost of their own volition from his face to the nape of his neck, where they clasped and she kissed him. They both recognized the kiss for what it was. A poignant farewell.

Titus knocked and immediately entered the room. When Serena saw the tall, slight figure behind him, she was astonished that young Loki, the Germanic slave boy, could so much resemble her in a long travel cape and a hood that concealed his lengthy Teutonic blond hair. He was eager to oblige her.

"The august Lady Maxima said the wicked empress—the old one—was after you. I'd do anything. You just tell me. Anything to pay her back. I saw her the day Lady Damaris was condemned. She smiled. While the rest of us were crying, she smiled. So tell me what to do."

"Did the guards around the Vestals' House examine you?" Philip asked.

"Just casually. Not close," Titus put in. "They were pretty bored."

Loki and Serena exchanged cloaks. She pulled the cowl far over her face. Philip carefully tucked away every strand of her hair, his hands lingering until Titus cleared his throat and hinted, "Those legionaries, Excellency."

"What about them?"

"Loki and I saw them tramping around Senator Cato's house a few minutes ago. One of 'em limping badly. They were looking for you. And several angry citizens made a lot of noise. Kept saying the legionaries had ruined their furniture, or something."

Without taking his eyes off Serena, Philip said, "Excellent. Loki, don't return home until after the changing of the guard. Say, the fourth hour in the night. Well after dark. Titus, while you're escorting our new Loki back to the Vestals' House, I'll go out and give our legionary friends a little trouble. Cato has been busy trying to locate a certain poisoner lately, and I don't want him finding all this trouble in his house when he returns."

Serena was alarmed at once. "Don't fight them. That's what they want. Please take care, Philip."

"Fight them, my love? Why should I oblige them? I've got to get the emperor back to Rome. There's no time to lose."

Titus reminded him anxiously, "But the legionaries. What of them?"

"Simple. I'll report them to the *vigili* for disturbing the peace."

Young Loki and Titus thought this was uproariously funny. Even Serena managed a smile.

She tried to keep up her spirits when they parted, determined to retain somewhere in her flesh the exact memory of his last touch, the way his hand lingered on her shoulder, then her arm, and at last her hand, before her fingers and his lost contact and she followed Titus down the next flight of stairs.

Neither Serena nor Titus exchanged much conversation as they walked rapidly down the slope of the hill toward the Via Sacra, which they followed into the center of the old Forum. Here Serena's nerves tightened, but the tough groom beside her seemed sure of himself, and she refused to let her own courage suffer by comparison with his. When they came within sight of the two *vigili* guarding the front entrance of the Vestals' House, Titus said, "Wave to them. Not like a female. Make it a flip salute."

She obeyed with trepidation, but one of the two police flipped a salute back. The other, yawning, ignored her. She did not breathe calmly again until she was inside the house and saw Lady Maxima waiting for her alone in the atrium.

Titus said loudly, for the benefit of all eavesdroppers, "Here's your slave Loki, august lady, safe again. A useful lad."

"Useful indeed," Lady Maxima answered in her dignified way, signaling Serena to follow her. Serena obeyed without removing the hood from her face. Titus didn't wait to be in-

terviewed by the senior vestal but bowed and left at once. Serena was certain he went to join Philip, to lend what help he could.

In Lady Maxima's closed and bolted room, the older woman held out her arms and Serena embraced her as she would have embraced a beloved mother.

"Now, now, no tears," the senior vestal ordered her, sniffing mightily. "If I'm not mistaken, we will be joined very soon by someone else who has been frantic about you."

"How is dear Hagar?"

"In and out of this room for the last few weeks. You understand, she has been taking care of the sick vestal Serena." Lady Maxima's smile was roguish in spite of the wrinkles of age and trouble that gathered around her mouth with that smile. "You see, my dear, the police have been afraid to enter this house. They consider it a sacrilege against holy Vesta. But once the empress returns, I've no doubt they will find her more frightening than the goddess, so we've very little time. We must get you washed, scrubbed and something done about that dreadful hair."

Hagar was soon at the door, and then hustling in to meet her beloved mistress, ready to transform Serena almost before the vestal had hugged her and complained that it was impossible to get on without her. Hagar was much too busy bathing Serena after that, scrubbing the various stains off her face and especially her hair, to show a sentimental streak, but Serena knew her old dragon well enough to see that beneath these exertions Hagar was concealing a strong desire to burst into tears of joy at the reunion. While she rubbed Serena's hair dry and tried to keep to commonplace matters, the affection showed through in her anxious old eyes.

"You're just lucky your hair's grown out and the color is only on the ends here. Thanks to Vesta for small favors. Did the august lady tell you I was arrested on the Flaminian road? Me, arrested! Along with Lady Maxima's body slave. Red faces all around, I can tell you, when they found it wasn't you."

"Oh, my poor Hagar! Did they hurt you?"

"Ha, do I look it? Old Hagar's dealt with creatures like that before. We all ended up in front of the Vestals' House receiving apologies. The poor fools thought holy Vesta would scoop down any minute and destroy them."

Serena winced as Hagar's rough hands pulled and scrubbed

long strands of her hair until they shone with the old, familiar golden luster.

"Let's hope they keep worrying about sacrilege until the emperor gets here. He is my great hope, Hagar."

The old woman shrugged. "He'd best hurry, then. The gossip is that Agrippina's just outside the gates, while Nero's spending several days in Capua. If he didn't leave Capua last night, he certainly won't beat the old Medusa into the city."

"He will get here."

Hagar gave her a sharp look. "Holy Vesta told you, my lady?"

"Vesta. Or someone else in authority."

"You'd better rely on the good hearth goddess. There's others that's got their own fires to kindle."

Serena blushed but pretended not to understand her.

By the fourth hour of the night, when darkness had fallen and young Loki, sneaking back through the little side entrance, was safely home, Lady Maxima permitted several of the vestals, including a sweet, sincere little novice, to visit Serena for a few minutes.

Lady Maxima announced, "The contagion is gone, I think, but marsh fever may travel through the very bedchamber itself, so take care."

Clea and the others fluttered delightedly around Serena. Even the wan and frail Justitia appeared and offered as her contribution, "At the august Lady Maxima's suggestion, I have sold my personal slave. That Thracian woman simply would not stop spying. Not that I ever listened to her."

"Of course not," Clea put in maliciously. She was always a staunch defender of Lady Serena.

"Who bought her?" Serena asked with interest, fully aware that the Thracian was responsible for Damaris' death and for her own danger. "She was certainly devoted to you, Justitia."

Lady Justitia agreed languidly. "But such a nuisance. Always bringing me tittle-tattle about everyone. Made me most uncomfortable. She was purchased by the household of the Empress Agrippina."

Serena was not surprised. The Thracian had obviously been born to serve a woman like Agrippina.

When the vestals returned to their duties, Lady Maxima explained their visit. "None of them questioned your illness. So far as Rome is concerned, you never left this room."

Hagar growled. "You needn't trouble about them that saw you elsewhere, either. When you showed your face to me this afternoon, I swear, I'd never have known you. Dirty! Stained! Well, you were a sorry sight!"

Serena glanced at Lady Maxima, who smiled but agreed. The three women felt much encouraged about the future, and Serena, blessedly free to rest in a clean bed after the endless days and nights that had gone before, went to sleep for twelve hours, and awoke after noon, the sixth hour of the following day, when she opened her eyes to see Lady Maxima standing beside her bed.

One look at the vestal's tense features and she knew what to expect. She propped herself up in bed on her elbows. "They've come to arrest me."

"For the murder of Prince Britannicus. On the order of the empress. You are to be examined in the judgment chambers on the Palatine."

Lady Maxima put out one hand, as if hoping to give her strength. In a curious way, it was Serena who comforted the older woman.

"But we expected it, didn't we? Lady Maxima, Senator Cato was trying to get evidence to protect me. He already has Leander Pella at his house. You must send someone to tell him. And someone else to warn the Praetorian prefect of what has happened."

"I will try again, my child. The *vigili* say that Tigellinus is out of Rome on some mission toward Capua. He left yesterday before sunset."

Serena determined to read something optimistic in his absence. "Then he will bring the emperor. You'll see."

"Meanwhile, my dear, we've our own problems. My first messenger was taken by two of the empress's guards. I don't know whether Senator Cato is aware of what has happened or not."

In silence, Serena got up and dressed in her vestal robes. Afterward, Hagar arranged her hair in its difficult, correct coiffure. Serena wanted to carry every shred of the dignity of her office with her as she walked through the streets and into the Palatine.

But in spite of everything, there was a nagging little voice within her that asked maliciously: "Will you go the way of Damaris?"

# 32

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Lady Maxima made a last gallant effort to reassure Serena.  
“I’ll get to Senator Cato somehow. I’ll let him know.”

But unfortunately, the two city *vigili* were still uncertain about their duties and were arguing with her long after Serena had been escorted away.

With the calm, passionless demeanor she had acquired in the service of the hearth goddess, Serena walked up the last flight of steps to the imperial apartments of the Palatine. Agrippina, too, had a sense of the dramatic, and in consideration of Serena’s “crime,” had ordered the vestal’s wrists bound, but this sight failed of its purpose. Instead of reminding the noon crowds that Serena was accused of poisoning the Prince Britannicus, it aroused sympathy and shock among some of those who saw her.

It was not long before one of the Praetorians ordered quietly, “Untie her hands. We are only making ourselves look ridiculous this way.” Another of the guards obeyed, not without hesitation.

Serena was surrounded by four of Agrippina’s personally chosen Praetorians, whose helmets with their high plumes made Serena look fragile, delicate, and small. She could hear the muttered protests, the louder calls of “Shame!” “Sacrilege!” and even fists clenched at the impassive Praetorians. There had been louder protests by those who saw the guards actually enter the vestibule and atrium of the sacred Vestals’ House. The knowledge had cheered Serena for a brief time, but now, as she entered the palace where Agrippina’s slightest word or gesture might signify her death, she began to remember all too vividly the last hours of Damaris’ life. And unlike the accusation against Serena, Damaris’ crime had not struck at the imperial family.

Serena stood a second or two at the top of the steps and looked back over the city at the Capitoline Hill with its mag-

nificent white temple to Jupiter Highest and Greatest, then toward the distant new forums of Julius and Augustus, the residential hills, the jungle of Subura slums, and last to the beloved little round Temple of Vesta below her. Would this be her last sight of them?

Curiously enough, the guards didn't hurry her. She moved into the maze of the Palatine, and they followed. It was as if they guessed her thoughts and perhaps even sympathized, though they said nothing. A minute later they turned away from the wide-pillared hall into a passage of the older buildings used by the frugal Emperor Augustus some forty years before. Ahead of her she saw two tough *vigili* of the city watch, who looked like torturers rather than guardians of the city.

"Tartarus take them, the bastards!" one of the Praetorians muttered. "Looks like she wants a few executioners handy."

This remark even more than the sight of the two *vigili* shook Serena's careful dignity. She stopped abruptly, touched the nearest Praetorian's arm gently, but there was an urgency in her face which he seemed to recognize. Apparently the Praetorians shared her revulsion.

"Senator Cato knows I am innocent. Can't someone tell him I'm here?" She was afraid to mention Philip. These guards obviously were used to taking orders from Agrippina rather than Nero. They might regard Philip as their enemy.

One of the other Praetorians cut in, "Take care with this one. Both the empresses will testify that she poisoned the prince."

"Ask the senator," Serena insisted. "He knows the poisoner." No one replied.

"This way." The Praetorians wheeled sharply to the left, followed by the *vigili* who brought up the rear, producing annoyed whispers among the Praetorians.

The vestal hadn't been in this part of the palace since the early days of Caligula's reign, when she was very young and very scared. The walls were still too close, the tapestries, draperies, and portieres too confining, and she imagined the Emperor Caligula's face with its bright eyes and sly smile peering out everywhere at her. The years and Caligula were gone, but his sister, Agrippina, now affected Serena in the same sinister way.

In the last passage, shadowy even at midday, the Praetori-

ans stopped before wide double doors and pushed them open in the impudent way of the all-powerful imperial guard.

Across the stark, cold audience chamber the Empress Agrippina was seated in one of the few high-backed chairs on the Palatine. Its style carried a certain significance, placing her, for instance, in a position superior to that of the Empress Octavia, who sat beside and a little below her in a cerule arm-chair. The young empress's presence, which first alarmed Serena, began to seem less threatening when she noted that it discomfited Agrippina. Contrary to Serena's expectations, Agrippina revealed none of the glittering hatred or the false sympathy she had formerly adopted toward the vestal. In her theatrical way she appeared in an austere, judicial role, emphasized by the imperial reddish-purple of her regal mourning. Octavia, on the contrary, looked young, brooding, and pitiful, wearing no jewels, shrouded in deepest purple that looked almost black in the moist gray atmosphere of the cloudy April day.

The presence of Octavia suggested new hope for Serena. She made up her mind to speak for the benefit of Octavia, to try to make her see the truth about the older woman.

Very much aware of her own dignified appearance at such a moment, Serena walked across the room through occasional spurts of windy rain that blew though the high, narrow, windy embrasures over which the draperies had not yet been drawn. The rainy day gave the high-ceilinged chamber very little help with the light, and Serena found it an eerie setting in which her fate would be decided.

"Empress!" She greeted Agrippina with a bare nod, turned slightly to face Octavia, and repeated "Empress!" giving both women the same emphasis.

Agrippina smiled. Octavia's pale cheeks flamed, and she cried, "Poisoner! Is there no limit to your insolence?"

At this furious accusation Serena's *vigili* reached out to seize the vestal, but Agrippina held up one hand, and having stopped them, waved them away to the far end of the chamber.

"You Praetorians who brought the prisoner may go," Agrippina said with a faint note of contempt. Clearly, she no longer trusted them. "I am not afraid. I have faced poisoners before."

"In your Majesty's service?" asked Serena in a low, calm voice.

Wide-eyed with shock, Octavia glanced at her mother-in-law. "You permit this from such a monster?"

Having seen the Praetorians leave the room with dignity, and being surrounded at a suitable distance by her own guards and slaves, Agrippina leaned toward her son's wife. She placed her ringed fingers on Octavia's arm. "It is bravado, *carissima*. She will condemn herself. We have only to let her talk. I wish you need not be present at such a painful moment. Are you certain you feel well enough?"

"I am the empress, too. I have a duty to hear the examination."

Her unexpected defiance angered Agrippina. Serena saw a muscle in the older woman's jaw flex and tighten.

"Very well, but it is unwise. You are looking ill, my dear." Octavia did not answer, and Agrippina swept on with her usual confidence. "You have accused me of something, Lady Serena. What is your evidence, and why should I poison a gentle boy I loved as my own son?"

"Loved as you love your own son, Majesty?" Serena asked ironically. "Your Majesty prefers to rule. There are two who stand in your way. One young man was the late Prince Britannicus." Her tone and accusation set Octavia on edge again. She looked from one woman to the other. Then she pushed her fists against her narrow temples.

"Why must you argue this? The woman gave my brother the barley water with the juice of the flower that put him to sleep. Mithridates, my astrologer, examined the dregs in the goblet. He knows the power of such medicines."

Serena opened her mouth to mention Locusta, but Agrippina cut in sharply, louder than was her habit, "This is all very painful for you, Octavia, with your beloved brother so newly in his grave. Guard, help the empress to her apartments. I'll see to the questioning of the accused."

It might be a death blow to Serena's hope if she were left alone with Agrippina and her slaves. As a badly shaken Octavia was assisted to her feet, Serena tried to plant the seeds of the denunciation.

"Lady Octavia, a woman named Locusta poisoned that goblet. You must question her. She has her shop in the Subura. When you see her, you will recognize her as the woman hired to—"

Octavia commanded her hysterically, "Be silent! I trusted you in Baiae. My brother and my father trusted you. You be-

trayed us all." She was being hurried toward the double doors.

Desperate to catch her attention, Serena tried to run after her but was caught and held by the *vigili*. She still persisted. It was vital that Octavia should hear.

"The middle-aged woman with red hair. She prepared the posion. She is Locusta. Ask her who employed her."

Agrippina was immediately present to interfere. "My dear Octavia, this woman condemns herself by her knowledge of . . . what is the name?—Locusta. An innocent woman would not have such knowledge."

"Ask Senator Cato how your father died." It was the best Serena could do. She knew that Agrippina was quite capable of having her killed on the spot. "An attempt to escape" would be an easy enough provocation. Serena wanted Octavia to act, to produce these all-important witnessess before Agrippina could proceed further with the execution she was sure to have planned. "Lady Octavia," Serena cried again loudly, as the young empress was being led out into the dark and gloomy passage, "ask yourself who appointed the red-haired poisoner to your service. Who urged you to hire her? Think! Ask yourself why the woman left your service after that night."

The girl turned, stared at her a second, then stumbled out of the audience chamber, hiding her face in her hands. She was evidently too stupefied by sorrow to understand the charge.

Serena looked at Agrippina. The empress was standing now, livid with rage, her eyes inhumanly bright, like Caligula's eyes. She ordered the *vigili*, "Move away. Leave us."

Uneasy and exchanging glances, Serena's two guards obeyed, striding to the opposite end of the chamber, where they could be at hand when they were called. The doorkeepers and personal slaves retreated until the two women, Agrippina and Serena, were alone as equals below the empress's self-made throne.

"Now, then," Agrippina began in a hard, businesslike voice, "no matter how it is done, you are going to die. You knew that when you interfered in imperial policy."

"Imperial or personal policy, your Majesty?" Serena's hands were very cold, and deep within her body she felt as shaken as Octavia, but she was also triumphant. Whatever happened now, she had pushed this wicked woman to a revelation of her real self.

"What difference can it make to you? You will never see him," the empress returned harshly. "He defended me throughout my life. He will never betray me to Nero. Not for a foul thing like you."

Serena knew quite well who "he" was. She took a deep breath and raised her voice deliberately. "Senator Cato and others know how the late emperor died. They know that the young physician Leander Pella was tortured because he didn't succeed in seducing me, according to your plan. We have his confession. Your Majesty must realize that it would be impossible—even for the mightiest woman on earth—to have all these witnesses poisoned."

The empress rubbed the amethyst stone on her forefinger with the thumb of her other hand. She studied the finger, pursing her lips thoughtfully, very much aware of the tension this would bring to the waiting prisoner.

"Not all witnesses need be removed. Only two. Locusta must go. That is clear. A woman in her business inevitably finds that fame means ruin." She raised her eyes suddenly, abruptly, from her fingers to Serena's face. It was an unnerving experience for Serena to find herself the object of that malevolent gaze. "And we both know the identity of the second intrusive witness, don't we, *carissima*?"

Serena winced at the endearment on Agrippina's lips, which Serena would always associate with Philip. She cleared her throat, rubbed it and her lips with one hand. Exertions and nervousness had made her mouth dry, and she wanted to force out her accusations so loudly the witnesses at the far end of the chamber would hear her. But she was briefly silenced by Agrippina's piercing scream, her quick beckoning to her personal guards, including the two *vigili*.

"Guards! Stop her! Wicked creature! What have you done? You think to cheat your just and lawful sentence by taking poison?"

The guards were beside Serena within seconds, thrusting her between them, turning her around, making her dazed and bewildered. She had expected an attack, anything but this deadly playacting.

Agrippina, firmly in command, stepped back to the little taboret beside her chair. She took a goblet and offered it to the guards.

"Make her drink this water. It will force her to disgorge the poison. She has only just swallowed it. Some powder, I

think. She put her hands to her mouth . . . But, gods! Who would have thought she would commit suicide here in the palace?"

A doorkeeper rushed into the chamber, slipping and sliding over the mosaic floor, but the group around Serena was too busy to notice. The doorkeeper whispered something to one of Agrippina's slave women. The woman signaled frantically to the empress.

"I will hold no audiences today: No one! Do not disturb me!" Agrippina ordered the doorkeeper, who bowed and hurried out, leaving the wide doors open.

"Proceed!" Agrippina snapped to her guards.

Serena struggled wildly as one of the guards held her body tight against his and the other tried to force her mouth open. Serena had no doubt that the so-called "water" contained the poison of the oriental flower that had killed Britannicus. The liquid trickled over her lips, down her chin, everywhere but in her mouth; yet the result would be inevitable, she knew. Her lips were forced apart. She screamed, only to swallow the first drops of the deadly "water." She was still kicking and writhing when Agrippina stepped over to the little group and tilted the cup, making it easier to pour from the heavy silver rim.

"Clumsy. Both of you. There. That will do the trick."

Serena twisted her head. The contents of the cup were impossible to avoid. She tasted the drops of liquid on her tongue and then a hand closed over Agrippina's fingers on the goblet, twisting hard. Everyone heard the empress's cry of pain. But her anger died away in disbelief as Agrippina gasped, "You!"

The goblet disappeared from Serena's sight. The long audience chamber came alive with whispers. Serena found herself free. She caught at the Empress Octavia's chair, which was nearest. With the back of her free hand still wiping liquid from her face, she opened her eyes and saw three tall Praetorians, two who had brought her to the Palatine, and another who was unmistakably their commander. Philip Tigellinus. He gave the goblet to one of the Praetorians with the order, "Hold it. On your life, don't drop it." A leather lash such as charioteers used still dangled by a loop from his wrist, and his face looked both weathered and streaked with sweat. It was obvious that he had come a long distance and driven his team hard. He limped when he moved, and the thick, healed scar was still plainly visible on his thigh.

By this time Serena saw that palace servants and others were peering in through the open doors. Nothing mattered so much to Serena, not even the saving of her life, as the fact that Philip had returned to be with her as he promised. He looked at her once, a searching study full of anxiety and tenderness, and it seemed for a second or two that he would commit the folly of taking her in his arms, but Serena glanced at Agrippina.

Agrippina's beautiful, sculptured face might have been modeled for the dreaded Medusa of mythology to whom a few daring souls compared her. Her voice was harsher than usual, but the long habit of command pierced her lesser emotions as she asked haughtily, "What is it, Prefect? Are you defending a murderer? Or are you a part of her conspiracy?"

Philip was equally cold, equally correct.

"Empress, it seems the wrong woman has been accused in the poisoning of his Highness the late prince."

Agrippina's glance darted around to those eavesdroppers nearby. She gave up the pretense of majestic indifference to him.

"Philip, I must talk to you."

But this was the ruthless police prefect Serena had heard about so often and seldom seen. His face was hard. He had never been more forbidding. His voice was totally devoid of warmth. "Empress, you will be glad to hear that Senator Cato has persuaded the guilty woman, an herb dealer named Locusta, to make a confession. She is at present repeating her confession to the highest tribunal."

The empress's head went up proudly, her eyes flashing like the jewels that adorned her hair.

"I am the high tribunal."

He repeated with calculated deliberation, "No, Empress. I said the highest. The pontifex maximus. And after that, the emperor."

A red flush stained her face as if she had been slapped. Her voice was shrill, panic stricken, unlike itself.

"Philip, I am Caesar. Do you think Claudius ever had the authority. Or my son? He didn't even want to be emperor. My actions made him that. He can do nothing without me, poor, silly boy. He didn't even recognize the danger of Britannicus. People were beginning to talk, to praise that boy. Another threat to Nero. One must do terrible things to have a great empire." She looked around, saw herself being isolated.

Even her own slaves began to behave oddly, shrank away. She went on as if she could not stop. "Nero will always need me to rule for him. Don't you see? Nero has no power. He never will have. *I am Caesar!*"

Tigellinus made no reply. He looked over his shoulder toward the open doors, then stepped aside, close to Serena, and reached for her hand, clasping it so that it brought life to her chilled body. Serena wondered why no one had answered Agrippina's bold challenge. Serena knew that her own life and probably Philip's would be forfeit if the empress's boast proved true.

But the crowd of eavesdroppers had begun to part, forming a passage between the open doors and the empress herself. All except Tigellinus and Serena were staring at Agrippina, fascinated as always by her splendor and authority. "I am Caesar," she had said, and many in that room agreed with her.

It was not until then that Serena saw the heavy, muscular young man who stood in the doorway across the audience chamber, a witness to the entire scene. Agrippina too saw him at last and knew she had thrown the dice and lost an empire.

Nero said airily, "Greetings, Mother," and moved through the crowd toward her, tossing the cumbersome train of his robe aside with an almost effeminate air as he walked, thoroughly enjoying this demonstration of his newfound power. Serena, watching Agrippina's back relax, guessed that the empress was taken in by his jovial manner. But Serena knew he had heard Agrippina's loud claim to be the one ruler of Rome. She watched nervously, glancing at Philip to try to guess the emperor's real mood by the face of his closest friend. Philip hadn't relaxed. Although his hand on hers was warm and comforting, the stern lines in his face had not softened. He saluted Nero, followed hastily by the two Praetorians. Nero waved them all aside with a careless gesture. He had come face to face with his mother, the empress, put his big hands on her shoulders, and kissed her cheeks. Serena watched him tensely. He was still the outgoing, friendly, good-natured man with a quick temper that soon mended itself. But just for a minute as he put his hands on his mother's shoulders, Serena fancied she saw, in the shadowy recesses of his face, other shades—his uncle Caligula; his mother, Agrippina.

The empress was soothed, patted her son's ribs as they embraced. "They tell me you were victorious in the Greek musical contests, Caesar."

"Victory, victory everywhere. A triumph." He glanced around proudly, his red hair still wet and curly from the rain outside. He looked like a boy again. Nothing sinister there. "Would you believe it? I won on several occasions when my throat was hoarse. At Corinth I won twice, for my voice and for my poetry."

Agrippina was rapidly recovering her confidence. His trivial remarks and manner were proof that he hadn't taken offense at her treasonable boasts. "You must give an entertainment to all Rome, my boy. Let us hear the music you created and the triumphs you won."

"Later, Mother, I'll be busy now. You haven't heard. I had only just arrived outside, on the very steps of the Palatine, when Senator Cato and the senior vestal met me. It seems a woman named Locusta had confessed to poisoning that poor Britannicus. In fact, the senator had such tales to tell me! Octavia is in tears, as usual. She believes him. But I, of course, must question this Locusta and find out, if I can, who employed her to commit such a crime. So you see, I'm much too busy to go off with you and plan entertainment."

Agrippina swayed. Pretending solicitude, Nero caught her in his arms. "Mother, you aren't well. Tigellinus, do you have the water that the vestal was being forced to drink when we arrived?"

"It is here, Caesar."

"Good. Now, Mother, sip a little water. You will feel better."

With one arm supporting her, Nero took the goblet from the Praetorian and raised it to his mother's lips. The empress looked around wildly, trying to avoid the silver cup.

"No! I am well. Perfectly well. To have you home is cure enough for me, my dear boy." With a breathy, nervous laugh, she waved away the goblet.

Nero looked over her head at Tigellinus with the remark understandable only to those few who knew Agrippina had hired Locusta. "It seems the empress doesn't want to drink the water she herself offered to the vestal. Give it to my physician, Xenophen, and let him tell us why." He smiled tenderly, but his eyes had the faint glitter Serena had seen in others of his family. "It's been too much responsibility, this

ruling of an empire. My poor mother deserves better of us. We will see to it that she is taken some place distant enough where she may be kept in peace and tranquillity, far away from the confusions of Rome. And, Mother, you've had all these wretched servants hounding you. You will be far healthier alone, with just such servants as are chosen by someone who loves you. Myself, for instance."

He calmed her shuddering frame forcibly, adding to Tigellinus, "Clear this room. You may spread the word through Rome that Caesar has returned."

No one who heard him doubted that.

# 33

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To be alone with Philip, even for a few minutes, was more than Serena dreamed of. Claudia Acté took Serena to her own apartments on the Palatine, ostensibly to help the vestal recover from the shock of her recent experience. There wasn't much time. Lady Maxima and Hagar would be waiting for her. But before that happened, Acté assured her, she could see Philip. Even now, Serena didn't quite believe she was free. She thought of that silver goblet that had been forced upon her, and she turned to Acté with an incredulous shake of her head.

"The empress really tried to poison me. I'm sure of it. So was Philip. I could tell. It is hard to believe."

Acté had been listening with her mind upon less happy endings, her own love affair. She reminded Serena with the sad cynicism of a palace resident, "The empress's name won't be mentioned publicly in connection with Locusta. You are prepared for that, aren't you?" Before Serena could protest her own fears of Agrippina, Acté added, "She is being removed from Rome and will be closely watched from this moment. Nero suspects she might have poisoned him next. Her new slaves will be her jailers. They are all devoted to Nero. And she will be far from us here in Rome. So you have nothing more to fear."

"But how can that be? She has a very long arm."

Acté smiled, shook her head.

"No more. I'm told the testimony of Locusta and the physician Leander Pella will be very useful. Nero means to hold it as a threat if the empress ever attempts her little poisoning tricks again. Even if she hopes to defy him, there will be no one in her suite that she can trust."

Serena winced. "I was remembering what she said: 'I am Caesar.' Can you imagine how she will suffer without an empire to rule, men to command?"

"Nero has grown up, Lady Serena. There will never again be room for another on this throne. Not his mother, or his wife. Or Poppaea Sabina...."

Serena fastened the ribbons on her gown. "Does Poppaea still occupy his attention?"

"It's no longer a matter of my losing him." Acté smiled, a twisted, sad grimace. "Now, it's the Empress Octavia who may lose him. Not that she ever wanted him."

Serena was shaken. "You mean, Nero plans divorce?"

"I mean Poppaea Sabina plans it. Two of them. Her own and Nero's. But she is capricious, and Nero knows that. He also knows I will love him until I die. Or until he dies. He would never doubt that."

Watching her, Serena understood an emotion she herself had never felt until the night she and Philip lay together at the inn on the road to Baiae.

"It is the same with me. Only I must wait. Will Philip wait for me, do you think?"

"Why not? He was faithful to Agrippina for almost a score of years, before he discovered there was nothing left of that marble woman to love. It won't be easy to bring the two of you together. The vestal laws are explicit."

Serena agreed, but her optimism asserted itself. "The emperor is Philip's friend. Surely . . ."

Acté nodded. "On the road, Tigellinus and I talked. He wants to marry you at once, of course. But he knows he must wait until Nero's authority outranks that of the old pontifex maximus. That shouldn't be too many months. The old pontifex goes where the wind blows. And today it blows from Nero's direction."

Serena hugged herself with joy. Watching her, Acté remarked with pleasure in the vestal's happiness, "You would believe in Philip's love if you heard us discussing the family you will have one day. He talks of two girls and a boy, or was it . . .?"

In her mind's eye Serena looked back to tender moments with Philip. "Two boys and a girl will suit us very well. But I shouldn't think of these things until I am free of my vows."

"That is the law. All the same, you are lucky that the prefect isn't a ladies' man. During the time he waits for you, he will be busy implementing Nero's plans. Democratizing the government, they call it. Nero wants to put more of the equestrian—the middle classes—into government. The Senate

has run things far too long, all for themselves." She laughed suddenly. "You are bored. But what Nero does seems to me all-important."

"I'm sorry." Then Serena asked eagerly, "Is he waiting? Is he nearby? If I could just be alone with him a few minutes to . . . to say our farewells."

"Nero?" Acté teased.

"The Praetorian prefect!"

The two women laughed together. The men they loved had returned, if not to them, at least to their sight.

Acté said, "Come with me. Not out those great doors. Behind this arras. Nero says he will visit me this way, in secret."

"Does the Empress Octavia care so much?"

"Octavia! No. He doesn't want Poppaea Sabina to know he still comes to me."

Serena smiled but shook her head. She couldn't understand how a woman could stand in the shadow of two other females to love a man. Did Acté have no pride? But one had only to look at the quiet Greek beauty to know that her love went beyond pride. Perhaps it had something to do with her strange religion.

Nervous and hopeful, Serena pushed aside the heavy crimson portiere, found a narrow door, and put her hand on the latch. She got no further. A far stronger hand opened the door from the other side, and she faced Tigellinus.

He pulled her roughly to him, and she, on her part, clung to the hard male body which had never been more dear, more beloved and necessary to her. Her voice repeating his name was muffled against his body, where his heartbeat told her something of his own feelings. She heard him whisper brokenly, "You were so long with Acté! I thought you'd never come out. I couldn't hear a word you said. Your plans . . . *Carissima*, I want you with me now. No more horrors like that long ride back to Rome, never knowing whether I'd get here in time or not. Even Nero had to race. It was Acté who persuaded him. She told him that Agrippina had stolen his empire. Her very words."

The room was a severe little library-tablinum with only backless chairs, small round marble taborets, and walls of books with their place tabs dangling in a blurred red pattern. Tigellinus backed to one of the little tables, sat down abruptly, and feasted his eyes upon her as she stood before him, held captive between his thighs.

"How lovely you are! No. Don't move. Just let me look at you. Head to foot. My darling, you'll never know how afraid I was when I was arguing Nero into getting here on time. I kept thinking of you in the Tullianum. You. The purest woman alive."

"Not the purest," she reminded him teasingly as she ran her fingers over his face, the tips of her fingers lingering, light as feathers, on his mouth. "I've loved a man. Had you forgotten, dearest?"

"Never. You make life miserable for me. Do you know that? All those Greek beauties were there for the taking, but I was spoiled. I'd had you. Will you believe me if I tell you I was faithful to you during Nero's entire musical conquest of Greece?"

In a practical voice that hid deep warmth, she countered, "How do you know *I* was faithful?"

After an astonished silence he burst into laughter. "Quite right, *carissima*. Now, what of our future? Nero is willing to add his influence to see if we can free you from the order. And the sooner the better. I'm getting on, my darling. There'll come a day when I've run my last race or am too old to take a wife and beget a family."

She leaned over his body, and drawing his face to her breast, kissed the coarse dark windblown hair at his temple. "You'll never be too old. You will never run your last race."

Claudia Acté cleared her throat. She had witnessed the entire scene. When they looked around, startled, she apologized. "I promised Lady Maxima I wouldn't leave you alone. It was the only way she would permit you these minutes together."

Serena understood the throat-clearing. "Is it time to go?"

"I'm afraid so."

"No!" Philip held her to him: "There must be another way. We might simply disappear. Remember? We could go north to Gaul or Britain. Marry and take another identity. We might . . ."

Serena loved him all the more for his idiotic suggestions, but she brought him down to earth in her practical way.

"Darling, your loyalty to Nero began when he was born. He will always need you, perhaps more than ever, now that his mother is to be exiled. We can wait six months, even a year, until I am free."

Acté put in eagerly, "With the prefect reorganizing the empire for Nero, giving less power to the Senate, and Lady Ser-

ena training a new vestal for the order, you will find your wedding day arriving before you know it."

Seeing the two women's eyes upon him hopefully, Philip gave in, but with his hands around Serena's waist he pleaded, "We can see each other now and again, can't we?"

Serena hesitated, knowing her weakness in his presence. Acté saw the problem at once and suggested with an attempt at cheerfulness, "Surely, at all the public ceremonies . . . but not, I think, alone."

He began to scowl, but Serena kissed the lines that creased his forehead and then looked at him, smiling. "I'll wait for you as Penelope waited for Ulysses. Before you come to me—who knows?—you may shake the world in Nero's name."

Acté coughed. Philip and Serena studied each other silently. When they kissed, it was with a passion that had anger in it, as if each branded a memory on the other. Acté drew Serena out of his arms.

"They are waiting. Caesar and the Lady Maxima."

Serena and Philip touched each other's hands. Then Philip straightened, took long, slightly limping strides to the double doors, and opened them for the women. He waved them out politely and stood looking official and impersonal as Serena and Acté walked into a large chamber holding at least fifty public officials, servants and senators who had formerly been in Agrippina's circle but who now elbowed and kneed each other to reach the young emperor.

Upon sight of Tigellinus and the women with him, Nero waved away the sycophantic crowd and motioned to Serena. Serena saw Lady Maxima and Senator Cato smiling at her on one side of the emperor and the piquant blond Poppaea Sabina on his other side. Poppaea, too, smiled, but she was equally busy nodding to acquaintances in the crowd.

Nero acknowledged Serena's slight, correct bow, taking her hand and leading her to the senior vestal. "Came home only just in time, didn't I?" he remarked jovially. "Rome was certainly in a tangle."

"We can never thank you enough, Caesar," Lady Maxima assured him, and Serena murmured her own thanks.

"Indeed, your Majesty, you disproved the charge against me."

Nero looked surprised. "Ah, that. Yes. I marvel at the coincidence." He saw that the women were puzzled, and he added exuberantly, "I had to return to Rome as fast as pos-

sible anyway. They've settled on tomorrow as the date of the Trojan Songs Contest in the Theater of Marcellus. They deliberately moved the date back so that I might enter the contest."

He added with a humility that Serena found sincere, though incredible in the circumstances, "They were even generous enough to agree that I might enter the contest without rehearsal. Not that I would do such a thing. I hope I am too professional for that."

Serena surprised an expression of acute boredom on the face of Poppaea Sabina, but it disappeared rapidly. She caught Nero's arm and murmured in her beguiling voice, "And you will win, beloved Caesar. How can it be otherwise?"

Lady Maxima, growing restless, suggested that with the emperor's permission she and Serena had much to do to reorganize life at the House of the Vestals.

Everyone present remembered Damaris. Nero, too, understood and dismissed them genially. "By all means, you have our permission."

Serena and Lady Maxima bowed and started out through the crowd that rushed to take their places near the young emperor. Looking around for a last glimpse of Philip and not seeing him, Serena studied Nero.

"He has changed from the boy I remember the night Claudius died," she murmured thoughtfully.

Maxima pronounced him, "A good man. And a good emperor. Perhaps the best we've had since Augustus. He cares about people. He saved your life."

Serena took the older woman's arm. "I agree with you in all things, my lady, but this. It was actually you who saved my life. You went to Senator Cato, who got the confession from Locusta."

"By torture," Lady Maxima put in matter-of-factly.

"And then, Philip—that is, the Praetorian prefect, saved me from Agrippina's poison cup. I was luckier than Claudius and Britannicus."

Maxima patted her arm. "I have missed my favorite daughter. How good it will be to have you back! At least the order will have you for a little time."

They started down the wide Palatine steps. At the bottom, in front of the two large, double-sized litters, stood a tall Praetorian and old Hagar, the latter looking cross and irritable

as usual. The Praetorian began to help her up the steps toward Serena. The old woman broke away from him and climbed clumsily to fall into Serena's arms.

As Serena hugged the devoted slave and kissed her tear-stained cheeks, her eyes thanked the Praetorian. She had known he must be Philip, even before he was close enough for her to see his features beneath the high, crested helmet.

Lady Maxima said huskily, "Well, well, we mustn't show emotion before all these citizens. Come along, my dear," and to Philip, "Thank you for saving our dear Serena, Prefect."

It was a dismissal. Philip saluted her and bowed. Unnerved, Serena scarcely dared to look at him in front of the senior vestal, but Lady Maxima gave him a smile and ordered him, "Prefect, will you help Lady Serena into her litter?" Before he could move, she reminded him of the law. "Until the pontifex frees her, Prefect, she belongs to Vesta. Do I have your oath as a Roman?"

Serena watched them anxiously. She hoped the senior vestal recognized that his oath was honestly given when he repeated, "On my oath as a Roman, noble lady."

Lady Maxima got into her litter, closed the curtain tight. Philip handed Hagar and Serena into their own litter. The bearers took up the poles. Serena looked back. Philip was watching her.

I am as happy as any human being has a right to be, she assured herself as the litter moved off and down the street toward the crowded Forum.